

AMAZING DETECTIVE MYSTERIES



JUSTICE

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The FRIGID FLAME

Complete Novel
By **RICHARD MATHESON**

**JOHN D.
MacDONALD**

TELLS A GRIM TALE OF
A LITTLE MAN WITH . . .
SCARED MONEY

LAS VEGAS TRAP

By **WILLIAM R. COX**



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Nick Crater gambled his life and bankroll on
a fast getaway with a smart casino girl.



Feature Novelette

by WILLIAM R. COX

Las Vegas TRAP

1

THE sun shone on Las Vegas and the desert was hot all around but there was a patch of black cloud over the mountain. There

would be a storm, thought Nick Crater.

There would be a storm, all right. From the casino of the Flaming Arrow, through the huge picture window, Nick could see them sitting under a canopy near the pool. He knew they were talking about him. Buster wore a black eye, a real good one.

Nick looked at his swollen fist. He had learned years ago not to hit for the head. It was because Buster was such a smug slob that Nick had risked his dealing hand. Nick had aimed for the nose. His timing was off.

Now it was a question of what Sam Makowsky thought of it. Every crisis occurring in or around the Flaming Arrow Hotel and Casino was settled by Makowsky. The paunchy, balding, former consul of an eastern murder syndicate, now turned legitimate, could still deal out trouble in large doses.

Nick wished he knew what they were saying. He could imagine how it would go, because he had heard it many times. Buster would be whining:

"You can't trust Crater. That's the big thing, Sam. He ain't to be trusted. He'll rat on us, Sam. He was never one of us. You know that, Sam. A gambler, sure.

A hanger-arounder. But not one of us. You know that, Sam."

Nick saw Makowsky scratch himself. Neither balm nor powders nor patent medicines could relieve him of a skin condition held over from his slum beginnings. His voice wheezed, judicial; pontifical in fact: "Now I don't know, Buster. He shouldn't of hitcha. I gotta admit he shouldn't of done it."

"He's out of line. Way out of line. We got to clout him, Sam. Any way you look at it, we got to."

Nick could imagine that much. He could not know the answer.

He wished he could sit with a deck and shuffle his nerves into shape. He wished his hand didn't throb. Buster had a real bad eye, all right.

Nick did not think of escaping. There are few places to run from Las Vegas when the big Cads of the mob are on your tail. He thought of fighting.

He would have to get a gun. He had never been a man to own a weapon. Tough Nick Crater, they called him, but he had scrupulously avoided the tie-ins which would lead to mob stuff. He had come into Vegas with a stake, nothing big. He had stuck to dice

and poker in the private rooms, and he had cleaned up.

Buster had put the dealer in the game. Buster was very stupid. He should have known Nick could spot a dealer on the first round. He should have known better than to deny it and call Nick dirty names.

Still, it had not been bright to clobber Buster and walk out of the game with all that money and the certain knowledge that the big, private game was only honest when a mark was losing. That was the bad thing, the knowledge he had and which he was in duty bound to report to the Greek and High-Play Monty and the other legit members of the fraternity. When this news got around, it could ruin the Flaming Arrow.

Makowsky and brethren had twenty millions in the casino and other Nevada properties.

He thought about where he could get a gun. He thought about Nevada law, which was tough and quick acting. He thought about the long, straight roads east and south, and the narrow road north toward Reno—and the wide open spaces where they could kill a man and leave him far out for the coyotes and buzzards.

The girl named Meg Bond came in and sat with her back to him. She was small and dark and good looking enough, and she had a body which made her an adjunct to the establishment. She played the bar and talked up the games to the marks. A zero girl.

Her voice came floating to him. "Nick?"

"Yeah."

"Sam gave the word."

"Mind your business, toots, and stay out of it."

"Nick! Listen."

"What for?" He was sweating and he didn't want her to know it. Tough Nick, huh? How tough can you get? He was twenty-nine, sort of young to die. "Lay off. Keep out of it."

She said, "Nick, I've got a crate. You know, the old gray Merc?"

"Keep out of it."

Her voice did not alter, "You got your stake on you?"

"Stay alive, toots. Beat it."

"You've got it. You're smart. Look, Nick, walk outside as if nobody was after you. Get into the Merc."

"You must be nuts."

"You want to die tonight, Nick?"

He did not want to die. He wished he could turn and look

at her, but that would be no good.

She said, "Get into the Merc like you're going to town with me for a sandwich or something. Laugh it up a little. Make a play for me."

"They'll have us in an hour. They've got those big heaps that'll do a hundred and ten."

"You don't know that Merc."

He heard the rustle of her clothing. After a moment, he looked. She was gone.

Makowsky's head was lowered, he was staring at the pool. Buster was grinning, lighting a cigarette. Those were the signs, that was for sure. The broad was probably right.

Even with a gun, he thought, there was the law and the mob money and the mob hanging together to make a murderer of him. What did they care if he knocked off a hoodlum or two? What did they care if he squawked from a cell? They had him either way and they had the legal talent to make it stick.

HE hated doing it, but he got up and sauntered out of the casino. The Merc needed a paint job but the tires were good.

Meg Bond switched toward him smiling.

He said, "Hiya, Meg? Want to drive me to town?"

"Maybe, if you're a good boy." She pressed close to him.

He patted her lightly and said, "I'm good to all cute little broads."

She laughed, a bit on the loud side. "I have to see Myrtle over at Last Frontier, then I'll drive you in."

He caught onto that one quickly. The town was north, the Last Frontier southward, where lay the wide road to California. He nodded and got into the car and slouched, smoking, not looking toward the pool. Meg wheeled the car slowly around the winding driveway and crept onto the divided road, waited as though timorous for a couple of cars to pass, then headed away from the Flaming Arrow.

He let her do it her way. At the Last Frontier she paused and went in, and came out a moment later. She didn't even have a coat. She was wearing a bright dirndl off-the-shoulder and sandals and no stockings. She was tanned and smooth-skinned. Her nose turned up slightly and she had a wide

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mouth, but she was better looking than he had thought.

There were hundreds of them around Vegas, parasites, tramps, mob women. He had never given them much of a tumble. Now he was riding the road south, fifty grand or more in his pockets, with one who worked for Sam Makowsky.

Was she setting him up?

It would be a simple and workable idea to have her take him down on the desert road, have a carfull of gunsels meet them and do the job without giving him a chance to get a pistol. He turned and looked sharply at her.

She was driving at an even pace, past the new places, the drive-ins, the motels along the Strip. Her upper lip was caught between white teeth, but otherwise she seemed calm and assured. She flicked him a glance and said, "I've had a couple of suitcases stashed in the back for a week. Buster shoved me around one night."

"Buster? I didn't think he went for girls."

"Buster goes for anything he can hurt. You know that."

He was suddenly glad he had hung the eye on Buster. Then frowned. "I left a thousand dol-

lars worth of wardrobe in my rooms."

"That's a laugh."

"Oh, very funny."

"I think it's funny. What would you want? They should bury you in a thousand dollars worth of threads?"

It was pretty funny at that. She was a tough girl, all right. She acted tough and talked tough and thought tough.

They left the Strip and she began stepping on the accelerator, a bit at a time. He glanced at the speedometer and his eyes widened. They were doing ninety.

She laughed for the first time. "This belonged to a car jockey. He went broke at the tables and I bought it for five bills. Nobody in Vegas knows about this heap."

"Looks like you were making long-distance plans."

She tooled around a slight curve. She shook her head. "Guys like you kill me. Plans? Certainly people make plans. Only high gamblers don't make plans."

He considered this. She was right, he decided. High players lived from game to game. How could they make plans? Hit the next game, ride out the luck whichever way it ran—that was

the general idea. But no plans. He asked, "How old are you?"

"None of your business."

"Twenty-five, six," he guessed. "You've been knocking around. Maybe you're married. Or you've been married."

"I've been married," she said, very short, signing him off.

"Got your divorce in Vegas. Stayed around for easy pickings." He didn't know why, but he kept goading her.

"That's right. What of it?"

"I was just wondering what kind of plans a dame like you would make."

The car slowed for a moment as she turned to glare at him. "Not to drive a hot card player some place God knows where. To save him from a pack of gunsels! That was no part of my plans, let me tell you, junior!"

"Not even if the guy has a stack of moola on him?"

She returned her attention to the road. They were clipping it off close to a hundred on a straight run down the slope. Her voice grew low and uneven. "Okay. Call it your way. I'm getting you out, that's enough. Make up your own mind."

He was fairly certain she wasn't setting him up by now. She was driving too fast to allow them to

catch the Merc. He said, "They'll be after us, you know. They're not that dumb."

"I know they'll be after us. I just want to get into California."

"Whereabouts in California? They got connections everywhere."

"Not in the sticks," she said. "The way I see it, we get the heap painted in a small town. We stay planted for a while. Then we separate and go wherever the heat won't be on."

He thought about that for a moment. "It'll work for you. Hair-dye, change your name, you'll be home free. Me? I'm a gambler, toots. I won't be able to work."

"Too bad," she said mockingly. "You got a stake, you're under thirty, you got your health. What the hell do you want? Why didn't you just stick around and let them plant you—if you're already dead?"

She was hard to talk with. He slumped in the seat. His hand hurt. He wished he used tobacco, he needed something. He stared glumly at the road ahead as the miles clicked off.

Makowsky would send one of the big, anonymous black Cads after them. It would come boiling down the road as soon as he dis-

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covered that they had skipped. Buster would be in it, because Buster, as Meg said, lusted for pain in others as he feared pain for himself. Buster would keep the gunsels on the trail and the California line would not stop them. They would go all the way to L.A. and check their connections there.



He opened the glove compartment, found a map and began perusing it. The Merc rode like a dream, purring on the road. He looked for a dot small enough to mean a little town but large enough to provide a garage and a hotel or motel. They would be someplace in California soon enough, at this rate. Las Vegas is only forty-odd miles from the line.

But over the state line is the Mojave Desert. Route 91 runs straight across it, through Valley Wells, Baker, Yermo; gasoline stops, at one of which Meg finally had to refuel. There was little

use of trying to conceal their identity, so they had a hot dog and coke, which they ate while driving on.

It was growing dark and as yet there was no sign of pursuit; nor would there be, thought Nick, not the way this girl drove. If they could only find a turning-off place. He could not read the map any longer, knew only that they had not left 91.

He must have fallen asleep, because it was pitch dark and they had slowed down when he became aware that she had an objective. He came fully awake. He peered ahead through the lights and saw a sign: FRESNO. Then a smaller sign: *Suntown*.

Meg said, "Suntown. This is the farm district. Sounds good to me."

"How can we tell at this hour?"

"I ducked into Barstow and wheeled around and came up Route Four Sixty-six," she went on. She sounded a bit weary from the strain. "It was dark. I don't think anyone saw me, except when I had to stop for a red light. There was a corner lamp shining right on us. Anyway, what's the difference? Let's try Suntown."

He said, "I'll drive. It'll look better."

He got out and walked around while she slid over. He stepped gently on the Merc and felt its smooth power. He went along the road as it narrowed to county-width and twisted a few times before running onto the edge of a quiet, seemingly deserted little town.

There was a large motel with a blinking light which spelled "Vacancy." He pulled up and sat a moment looking at her.

She said without trace of a smile, "Mr. and Mrs. John Smith won't do it. Pick a good name."

"It'll have to be mister and missus because it would look funny any other way. Small town people don't dig unmarried couples settling down in their midst."

"I'm way ahead of you. Lucky I've got my bags. You'll have to scout the country for clothes tomorrow."

2

HE NODDED to that. He went to the door and rang a night bell. A sharp-eyed, big man came and looked at him.

Nick said, "Good evening. My wife and I would like a cabin."

The big man shoved a card at him. Nick signed it, not without amusement, "Mr. and Mrs. Rich-

ard J. Makowsky." The "Richard" was a stroke of genius, because "Nick" could be suited to it.

The big man said, "My name's Barber. Bull Barber, folks call me. Take Number Six. Excuse me, huh? We're havin' a little poker game." He chuckled. "I'm ahead and wanta stay that way."

Nick took the key and went out to the car. He whispered, "How about that? They've got a game going. Wouldn't I walk right into a game?"

She said, "Get those bags and open that cabin, junior. You're not sitting in any game."

"Maybe not, but I'm looking at it." He grinned. "Imagine me not looking at it!"

"If you pick up a card, they'll spot you," she pleaded. "You got the look about you, Nick. Don't be a fool. Come into the cabin and I'll play gin with you—anything."

He carried the bags in. She had three, but one of them was pretty light. He looked at the twin beds, cocked his glance at her.

She blushed.

He stood a moment with his mouth hanging foolishly open. Then he turned his back on her and pretended to be examining the latch on the door. Not many

broad had enough left in them to blush about something like that. Even a tough dame from the casinos has a right to privacy, he thought.

He said, "I couldn't deal if I tried. My mitt still hurts." He picked up a pitcher from the wide, scrubbed chest of drawers. "I'll make like I'm asking for ice."

He went out. She was standing there, looking her protest but saying nothing as he left. She looked lonely and hurt. Nick spotted the light in one of the back cabins where the game must have been in progress. He went toward it, feeling a little guilty, but unable to refrain from observing the sort of poker game played in the farming village of Suntime.

The big man opened the door reluctantly, glanced at the pitcher and said, "Oh, ice, huh?"

Nick gave him his most ingenuous grin. "No hurry. My wife is sleepy and I'm not. Okay if I watch awhile?"

"Well, I dunno." Barber turned and looked uncertainly at the men around the table.

Nick was aware of close scrutiny. There were five men altogether. One wore a silver badge upon a gray shirt. One was small

and very young and dark. There was a sturdy farmer with blunt hands, and a clerkish man with horned-rim glasses. On the table was a stack of money that would have choked a double-barreled carburetor.

The officer with the badge said, "Stayin' in town, Mr. Makowsky?"

"Maybe. We're vacationing."

"You a poker player?"

"Sometimes. Not tonight, though."

The officer had a sleepy look about him. "The man can't sleep. Let him in, Bull."

Barber went to the table and sat behind a generous stack of chips. The cop dealt. "I'm Joe Sloan. Light and rest yourself."

The others were Andy Perez, too young for such a high game; Asa Pine, the stocky countryman, and Rance Hayden, with the eyeglasses. They were playing straight draw and stud, dealer's choice. They knew exactly what they were about.

Nick sat down quietly, knowing he would be forgotten at once. They were deep in the game and it was table stakes. There were a couple of thousand dollars on the table.

He had heard of games like this from fellow gamblers, al-

though he had never come upon one before. Men in small communities, their lives bounded by the family and town, seeking escape through high gambling. Skilled through constant practice, wise to the averages and the odds, passing the money around among themselves over the long run with nobody badly hurt. Unless one of them lost his head and ran into the deep hole. Then there might be an embezzlement, a surprise runaway and a sorrowing family and town who cannot believe it of good old Sam Sap.

These players were exceptionally skilled and intent. The boy, Perez, who spoke with a faint trace of accent but seemed well educated, was amazingly adept, Nick saw at once. This was a kid who was born to cards, who needed no instruction to match his wits against the best of them.

Barber, who was the big winner, was easily the poorest player. He tipped off by eagerness, he threw chips too fast, he rode the crest of his lucky run with a high gustiness. Once he spoke sharply to Perez about an edge and the boy flushed and repressed a hasty reply.

At one a.m. they were still playing, oblivious to Nick. Barber bade fair to bust the game. He

was last-carding them at stud, topping them on the draws. They were all playing carefully now, aware that you can't beat Lady Luck. Sloan, the cop, seemed half asleep. They were waiting out the big man's run and the game grew dull.

Nick said a soft good-night and found the icebox himself. He let himself softly into his cabin, aware of Meg's regular breathing, remembering suddenly how she had looked coming out of the Last Frontier with her loose dress blowing, how she had looked when he wounded her feelings on the trip, how she had looked standing hurt and worried when he left the cabin to watch the poker game.

He wondered if he should wake her and reassure her. What would he do if she were really his wife?

Nothing in his experience provided him with an answer. He stripped down to his shorts and got into the vacant bed.

WHEN he awakened it was broad daylight. The cabin was empty. He blinked for two seconds, orienting himself. Then he was out of bed like a flash and reaching for his coat and

trousers. A glance out through the window showed him that the Merc was gone.

He slapped the lining of the jacket first. He felt the stitched-in secret pocket crackle at his touch and his heart began to beat again.

There was fifty thousand dollars in that pocket and he had left it carelessly on a chair, which was the best possible place to leave it—excepting that there had been a Vegas broad in the room who knew he was toting a roll. He then felt for the wallet in his pants pocket.

It was gone.

He dropped the trousers on the chair and again looked out the window. His watch told him it was nine o'clock. There was no sign of life outdoors, and still no Merc.

He shrugged. So there was a couple of grand in the wallet. It was worth that to get clear of Vegas.

Or was it, he wondered?

Here was a dame who admitted to long-range plans. So she knew he had socked Buster in the nose. She had meant to get away, she knew Nick was carrying a roll. So she whispers that he is going to get killed, takes him out of town, steals his wallet and goes on her merry way.

He found a tiled, ample shower stall and hot water and nice, heavy towels to dry himself. Bull Barber ran a neat place. Nick figured that it would be easy enough to invent a story about his wife deciding to visit a sister he did not like, then to fake a call and tell another story and take a bus to San Francisco. A slow ship to Honolulu, he thought, would be the deal. If there was heat, let it cool. He could learn if Meg had lied through a man he knew in Hawaii.

A thought struck him. He dashed across the room and grabbed his jacket. He pulled the threads loose, opened the built-in pocket.

It was real money. She hadn't pulled the newspaper-pulp switch on him, then. She had merely been too stupid to look further than the wallet.

He pulled on his clothing, shaking his head. He was getting soft in the head as well as the body. Yesterday he could have sworn this broad was leveling. His business demanded that he know a few things about people. He would die broke, if he kept misjudging folks as he had Meg Bond.

He was taking a last look

around the room when he heard the woman scream somewhere among the motel cabins. He turned and ran out, the door slamming behind him.

It was the cabin where the poker game had taken place. The woman was a tall, wide-shouldered figure, backing toward him, her hands extended, screaming again. He wondered where Barber was that he didn't come running.

In a moment he knew. Barber was lying inside the cabin door. He was bleeding no more, but sometime during the night he had bled a great deal. There was a wound in his chest and his throat was cut. He had made a hard thing of dying, but through holes like that even the life of a big man had to run out.

Nick found that he was holding the tall woman by one elbow. She was still screaming, but she broke off abruptly and sagged and he caught her before she could fall.

He stood there, six feet from the corpse, on the doorstep of the cabin, holding her considerable weight, looking helplessly around as the Merc came in and braked to a stop in front of Cabin 6. He blinked, stared and then yelled:

"Meg! Come here and take care of this woman."

The girl sat behind the wheel for a moment, as though undecided. When she climbed out she came cautiously down the path toward them, her eyebrows forming ellipses of doubt and amazement.

Nick said, "Damn it, hurry! There's a guy knifed in there."

Meg broke into a little run. Between them they got the woman to the front cabin which was partially an office. She was Mrs. Barber, all right, because she managed to point out the bedroom. When they let her down she moaned once and fainted. She had long, shapely legs and good ankles. Nick looked at her hard for a moment, but she did not stir.

Meg demanded, "What's this all about?"

He shut her off with a hand over her mouth, and pulled her into the office part of the place. He whispered, "Don't be too sure that husky dame is in a dead faint. Her husband is out there with his throat cut and a hole in his gizzard."

"Then let's get out of here fast," said Meg.

"And have the State Cops on us? This is a murder. Last night

Barber was loaded with loot from the poker game. You want them to think we robbed him?"

She steadied herself. "Okay. Call the law. Let's clear ourselves and scram. We don't want photographers, you know." She took his wallet from a purse and handed it to him. "I've got some clothes for you in the car. Nylon shirts, shorts, sox. Stuff we could run short on while traveling. Also some coffee and buns and fruit juice."

"Did you have to take the leather? Couldn't you have just lifted the money?"

"I'm nosey," she said defiantly. "I wanted a peek."

"Why, I ought to—" He grinned. "Okay. Let me get the local John."

He asked the operator for Headquarters, and a slow, vague voice answered. He said, "Joe Sloan?"

"Yeah."

"This is the guy who kibitzed last night. I just found Barber in the cabin. You better come right over."

"You're Makowsky?"

"That's right. I'll be looking for you."

There was a pause. Then Sloan asked, "Bad, huh?"

"As it can be, for Barber."

The phone clicked. Nick walked across to Cabin 6 with Meg. There were a lot of things to consider. He drank orange juice from a carton, and swallowed a roll and some coffee. When an old Ford slid into the parking space, he said to Meg, "We're now Mr. and Mrs. Nick Crater. On account of that's the way my ident reads, as you well know."

She flushed again, nodding. He went outside and greeted Joe Sloan. The cop was a deceptively big man, middle-aged, with large wrists and hands. His manner was mild.

"How about Myra Barber?"

"My wife's going back to take care of her," said Nick. The cop's eyes followed Meg as she walked across the parking space to the front cabin. Nick went on. "Mrs. Barber found him. I heard her yell—and ran over. She flopped. I didn't even go inside."

"Makowsky your right monicker?"

Nick said flatly, "No. I'm Nick Crater and I got some heat on me. But it's not legal heat. It's mob stuff."

Sloan did not speak for a moment as they walked toward the cabin at the rear. Then he said, "I'll buy that for now. This will

bring in the State boys, though."

"I could fill out another register card with my right name." He produced his wallet. Sloan took a hard look at it, at the wad of money inside.

"You're a dealer?"

"Independent."

Sloan nodded. "Saw it in you last night. Gets so a man can tell." They were at the open door of the cabin. "This is bad for a lot of people. Barber and the Perez kid had a go after you went to bed. Andy Perez carries a fruit knife. Switch blade, for testing fruit. He works in an orchard. Smart kid. Got a nice wife and baby." He was examining the corpse without touching it, bending close, moving lightly about. "Bull couldn't win very good. A nice guy, not a bad loser. But he couldn't win."

From a coat pocket Sloan took a small but very expensive camera. He walked back to his car, returned with a tripod and flash bulb attachment. He moved with deliberation, setting up his camera, taking pictures. He took the roll of twelve before he was satisfied. He said, "I'll get Doc Kramer. Not that it matters. Guess I better pick up Andy."

"You think the kid killed him?"

SLOAN looked at Nick through half-closed eyelids. "This is sort of backwoods, Crater. Pine heard Bull and Perez arguing. Rance Hayden heard it, and he's nervous. Both of them might talk. People around here, some of them, got old-fashioned notions. A few don't like Mexican-Americans. Special they don't like quiet, clean, well educated Mexican-Americans who keep a good job. Yeah, I better get Andy in jail." He grinned and added, "You oughta be tickled to death. It takes the pressure of you."

"I thought of that, too," said Nick. "I could have done it. I'm carrying a couple thousand dollars. But if you take a good look, you'll see that it's all new bills. Las Vegas dough. I happened to clip a big game."

Sloan nodded sleepily, "Already noticed. Stick around, Crater. Maybe you better come in and make a statement in an hour or so."

There was no way out of it. If only the newspaper men didn't get on the job too quick, so that the Vegas papers didn't pick up the story, it might still work out. Nick asked, "Is there a good auto

painter in town? The Merc could stand it."

Sloan said, "Happens I own the garage. Got a man that ain't too bad for what you want."

"I'll drive it down and leave it with him," said Nick. "Maybe we can do a little business when this murder is cleared up."

Sloan said, "Maybe we can, at that." He closed and locked the cabin door, leaving the body where he had found it, climbed into his car and drove away.

It occurred to Nick that Sloan had left without seeing the widow. In fact, after Sloan's first question he had not again mentioned her. Nick thought this over as he walked to join Meg and Mrs. Barber. It could mean several things. It would be interesting to learn— Nick shook his head stubbornly. The last thing he needed was to become involved in this small-town kill.

Meg met him at the door, wearing a puzzled expression. "She says she's all right now. She practically threw me out of her room. What gives with this dame?"

"We had better not try to find out."

"You can say that again and again and again. How did you make out with the local law?"

"I think he can be had," said

Nick slowly. "In fact I am thinking several things about him which would be better left unsaid."

"This is tough on us." Meg's brow was deeply furrowed. "Buster will be turning back from L.A. by now. He'll double check all along the highway."

"And if they publish our pictures—that'll be just dandy for us," said Nick. He went to the desk in the office and found the index of register cards. He held his own a moment, then put it in his pocket. "I want one word with Mrs. Barber."

"Nick, we can't get mixed up in this."

"That's why I want to see her." He knocked on the door to the living quarters, then entered.



The woman was sitting in a chair, her long legs extended. She was deep-bosomed and in the morning light younger than he had thought, and handsomer. She looked at him without expression

for a moment, then asked in a deep, controlled voice, "I didn't get your name."

"Nick Crater," he said.

"I want to thank you."

"I didn't do anything constructive," he said.

"It—they haven't taken him away, yet?"

"Not yet."

"He looked awful. A man you've lived with— He looked bad."

She must be in a state of shock, thought Nick, because there is no emotion in her, just surface reaction. Unless she didn't care. Unless she was relieved.

He said, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Barber."

"Yes. I'm sorry, too. Very sorry." She was looking down at her legs. Her skirt had slipped up to her knees, but she made no effort to adjust it. "Do they have any idea who killed him?"

Nick hesitated. Then he said, "Sloan said something about Andy Perez. They had an argument last night. Perez owns a knife."

Myra Barber snorted. "Andy Perez! He was stabbed in the chest. Little Andy? Why, Bull could have eaten him!"

It was none of his business, he only wanted out. But he had to

ask, "You got any choice, Mrs. Barber?"

She lifted her eyes. They were deep, dark blue, almost black, unfathomable. "One or two, Mr. Crater. I'm not a local product, you know. I've been a few places. They'll tell you downtown about me."

"I'd rather make up my own mind about people." He should get out of there, he should mind his own stupid business, he knew. He could not imagine what held him.

"Yes. You've got the look about you." She stood up. She was easily five feet seven or eight and solid. Not fat; muscular, he saw. Shapely and strong. It would take a big man like Bull to handle her, he thought. She said, "I'm all right now. When are they meeting downtown?"

"Meeting?"

"When did Sloan ask you to show?"

"In an hour or two."

"I'll be there. Thanks again, Mr. Crater."

He hesitated at the door; asked, "Mind telling me what you think they're going to tell me about you?"

"Maybe it would be a good idea." She went to a table and picked up a heavy, leather-cov-

ered, scarred scrap-book. She walked across the room to him and handed it over.

He flipped it open. The picture of the woman staring at him from an eight-by-twelve glossy print was wearing tights. Across the bottom was pasted a typewritten caption, "Myra Hamilton, Woman's Wrestling Champion, appearing at Starbuck Arena, Tucson."

He said, "I seel" She was a stupendous woman in tights. "Was Bull a wrestler?"

"He tried it. Didn't have the stamina. So we bought this place in his home town. It's been a bit rough."

"I believe it." He sighed. "What can you do? I'll see you downtown, Mrs. Barber."

"Yes. Thanks again." She took back the book and went to the table. He left her leafing through its pages.

He went swiftly to the desk and made out a new card, using his own name. He hurried across to Number 6.

Meg let him in. She was wearing a light robe and her hair was damp from the shower. He tore up the original card and burned it in an ash tray, and flushed the ashes down the toilet. When he came out Meg was pulling a suit-

case from under her bed. That was why he had thought she scrambled, he knew, because she had neatly stacked her bags out of sight.

He said, "Myra was a lady rassler. People hereabouts are suspicious of her. Perez owns a knife. Sloan throws him in the jug. Sun-town must be quite a burg."

"You can change clothes in the bathroom," Meg said. "We ought to look pretty for the cops."

"Don't be bitter." He felt almost gay. "You always manage to look pretty."

She had a pair of panties in her hand. She stood erect, staring at him. "Well, thank YOU, Mister Crater!"

"Don't give me that routine. I said it, and I meant it."

"Okay, you said it. Change your linen if you want to, and give me a break out here."

"You're being bitter," he told her. He picked out the things she had bought and went into the bathroom. Through the door he called, "Don't let a little compliment go to your head!"

"Like the man that was kicked by the mule, I consider the source," she said loudly and angrily.

He chuckled, changing into the fresh shorts and shirt. She had

managed to get the right sizes. Snooping while he was asleep, he thought, like with the wallet.

When he came into the large room of the cabin she was attired in a fitted gabardine suit and a demure blouse and high-heeled shoes which did a lot for her legs. He whistled, and she glared at him.

Ignoring her displeasure, he said, "We can get the Merc painted and I think we can manage California registration, which gives us new plates."

"That'll do a lot of good when Buster learns we're here and comes in with his boy friends."

"Can we worry about that when it happens? Let's go and see Suntown, and try and not bite each other."

MEG got into the car, and he drove into the village. It was a one-street town; with a bank, a five and dime, several cafes, a farmer's market, a super-market and a city hall of no pretensions. It may have stormed in Las Vegas but it was bright and shiny in Suntown. There was no unusual activity in the streets, but several cars were parked outside city hall when they drove by.

They found Sloan's Garage at

the end of the street. A small, wiry man who said his name was Colly Cline was expecting them. He said he could do the best job with black paint, and suggested a California-top effect, which he could manage with two fast-drying coats of white. They agreed and left the Merc.

It was not until they were walking back to the city hall that they noticed the people. There were not many, but those that were abroad seemed prosperous and tanned and healthy—and curious. Their stares were open and not from admiration, Nick felt. Word must have gone around in the mysterious manner of small towns.

The steps leading to city hall had a few idlers, who did not have the appearance of the usual loafers. They were rugged men with hard faces, and they also stared. Nick went indoors and found a room which seemed to be occupied. He opened the door. It was a council chamber with a long table surrounded by hard chairs.

Joe Sloan said, "Come in. We were expectin' you."

At the head of the table sat Rance Hayden. Next to him was Asa Pine. Perez was next, and then Joe Sloan.

The policeman drawled, "You know everybody. That's Miz Crater, I reckon. Rance is mayor. Asa's sorta representin' the farm element. Andy's under arrest. You get the picture?"

Nick led Meg to the opposite side of the table and they sat down. She was a cool one, he thought, with a slight smile for everyone, but steady and detached. He said, "Mrs. Barber will be along directly."

Andy Perez was pallid. "Angelina? Did you see Angelina?"

"I told you I sent out for her," said Sloan patiently. "Take it easy, Andy."

"Take it easy? Take it easy when I am accused of murder? What do you think I am, Joe?" The boy's hands twisted together.

"Andy lost his knife," said the sleepy voice, directing itself at Nick. "He also had more money on him than a heavy loser should have. Andy's in a fix."

Rance Hayden said nervously, "Nothing's proven. Bull and him were always squabbling, but they were good friends."

"Accordin' to what you call friends," said Asa Pine gruffly.

"We *were* friends!" exclaimed Perez. "He loaned me the money for the payment on the mortgage Rance knows the mortgage was

due today. I never miss a payment."

"The bank would have waited," said Hayden softly. "You know we'd have waited for payday."

"I promised Angelina a new dress," whispered the boy. "I lost too much. Trying to beat Bull when his luck was running. I know better than that. But I did it."

Sloan's voice droned, "You don't need to talk, Andy. You better get a lawyer."

"No! I am innocent. It will be proven. I cannot afford a lawyer. Angelina and Pedro need things."

Meg's eyes were fixed upon the distraught youth, Nick saw. He watched the slim, brown hands writhe, the fingers intertwining like small, frightened snakes. Every emotion the boy felt was reflected in those fingers. Anguish, fear, love for his wife and child, rebellion—what else?

The door opened, and Myra Barber came in. She was wearing a dark dress but was hatless. She walked to the chair alongside Nick, nodding silently to the others and sat down.

Hayden said in his jerky way, "We're all sorry as hell, Myra, you know that."

"Thank you. I know Bull was your friend."

"He was a good man," said Asa Pine heavily.

"A fine guy."

"A straight shooter."

"We'll miss old Bull."

Andy Perez came to his feet. His twitching hands went flat against the table top. He cried, "Myra, you don't believe I killed him? For money? Would I do that? Tell them, Myra, tell them I would not do that!"

She looked steadily at the boy and said calmly, "No. You didn't do it."

There was a moment of silence. Perez sank back into his chair, sighing relief.

Sloan said, "Who did, Myra?"

"I don't know."

"What makes you so sure Andy didn't?"

"He couldn't. Not from in front."

Sloan shook his head. "If Bull didn't see him, if he slipped the knife into the chest cavity, he could have."

Myra looked hard at the policeman. "You're not a fool, Joe. What makes you want to pin this on Andy?"

Hayden interposed quickly, "Now, Myra, nobody's pinning anything on Andy. His knife is missing and he had money we believe Bull won from us and

from him. Bull had a big night."

The woman nodded. "I could hear him trumpeting until I fell asleep."

"Did you hear anything else, Myra? Later, after we broke up?" Sloan leaned forward. "Did you maybe have a word with Bull before he was killed?"

To Nick's amazement, the woman laughed. He looked directly at her where she sat beside him and she turned, still laughing, addressing him, excluding the others. "You see? I'd be a better patsy than even little Andy. Do you dig these characters? They're shooting shotguns, so they'll be sure and have a hit. You should try and live in a town like this, Mr. Crater. It's real great fun."

She got up and faced Sloan. She said, almost carelessly, "Doc Kramer took Bull's body. He said he'd talk to you later. I'm not holding still for any more of this. If you want me, send a warrant."

After she had left there was a stillness laden with something Nick could not quite define. His mind raced, he thought of the slight note, undetectable to the others, perhaps, which had been beneath Myra Barber's laughter.

She was defiant, all right. She was also a bit frightened.

Sloan was murmuring, "You noticed she wasn't wearing any mournin' for Bull, didn't you?"

"The New York Store don't carry it in stock," said Rance Hayden sharply. "Myra's sensible. She may be different and hard, but she feels Bull's death. Anyone can see it."

Andy Perez said passionately, "She did not kill him, no more than it was I who killed him."

"Yeah? You were always more her friend than his'n, huh, Andy?" Sloan grinned.

4

THE boy's pallor was flushed with sudden heat. He started to reply, then bit his lip, lapsing into silence. There was sullenness in him now, Nick thought.

There was something beneath the surface of each of them. Nick knew it as though he were sitting in a poker game with them, judging their strength or their weakness in a large pot. It was fascinating to try and figure just what each of them had on his conscience.

The door opened again, slowly this time, as though a person without much physical strength

were pushing at it. A small feminine figure shouldered through it, carrying in her arms a child too large for her capability. Perez leaped from the table and ran and took the child in one arm and threw his other arm around the girl and spoke liquid Spanish in her ear, a torrent of words apologetic, tearful, explanatory, fearful.

Sloan said kindly, "Don't be scared, Angelina. Come over here and set by me. Let Pedro play around, he can't hurt nothin'. Come on, Angelina."

The other two local men were looking at the small Mrs. Perez, and Nick could see that they too were touched, that they did not like this, that they wished they were somewhere else. He turned back to Angelina and inhaled sharply.

She was incredibly lovely. She was fragile and creamy skinned and all large doe eyes, with a small, perfectly formed mouth and the blackest of black hair wrapped tight around her shapely little head. She was tiny and slim to a fault, but slimness only lent to the ethereal quality she exuded like a breath of fresh air.

She sat on the edge of the chair. Nick looked at Meg and saw again the tears Meg never seemed

to shed. He felt Meg's hand on his arm, the fingers biting, as Perez hovered over his wife and she turned up her face and spoke a reassuring word to him.

Looking at them, the young Mexican-American and his wife, the way they gazed into one another's eyes, the pure trust and emotion that passed between them, Nick felt his throat constrict.

Hayden's shrill voice cut into Nick's thoughts, "It's better to hold him awhile, Angelina. You know how people are. Jealous of Andy. Better we should keep him safe. You must understand."

Sloan added, "Yeah, it's for his own good, Angelina."

She only looked at her husband. Her voice was as soft as the rustle of dove's wings. "But if he has done nothing, why do you put him in jail? Why should people want to harm us?"

"It's what people *think*, Angelina." Sloan was actually cajoling her. "We know you're not like ordinary Mexes. But some people ain't got duck sense."

"We *are* ordinary Spanish-Americans. Only Andy, he says it, 'Americans-Spanish.' We are born here. We study, try to do right. Pedro, he does not even learn our language, our fathers'

language, not until he speaks English good first. This Andy decides." She looked proudly at her husband. "In Korea, he decides, before Pedro is born."

"I know," said Sloan, running a finger inside the neckband of his shirt. "I know how good you are. It's going to be all right, Angelina."

"When you put Andy in jail, it is not all right," she said gravely. "It is a dishonor and a shame to his son."

Meg stood up. Nick was beside her in a moment, talking fast, before she could begin. "I'll make a written statement any time you say, Sloan. Meantime—we'll leave you with it."

He steered Meg out of the room, aware that the others looked longingly after them, wishing they too could go. He walked her swiftly out Main Street toward the motel. A man stepped out and flashed a bulb in their faces, then showed long horse teeth in a grin and said apologetically, "Local press. You wanta make a statement, Mr. Crater?"

Nick sighed. "No. Check with Joe Sloan."

"No offense. You'll talk later?"

Meg was shivering now, but Nick said, "No offense. Yes, I'll be delighted to talk later."

Ten paces away Meg gritted, "That does it. It'll go out on wire service. Buster can't miss us now."

"Never lose your temper with the press," said Nick. "And what's the difference, anyway? You know we can't leave while that girl's husband is in a jam."

Meg stopped frowning. She impulsively took his arm and squeezed it. "You did see it, then?"

"I saw it."

"You—you haven't seen it in a long time, what they have?"

"I've never seen it. Not for real."

They walked a few steps. There seemed to be quite a few people on the street now. Too many people for noontime in a town this size. They were sober-faced, and they stared.

Meg asked, "What about that girl in your wallet?"

Nick stopped dead in front of a restaurant, looking down at her. "You mean Emily?"

"The girl in the bathing suit. The only picture you carry."

Nick said, "Emily was my sister. That was her last picture. Polio."

Meg's face seemed to break up into a dozen pieces. Her eyes grew wide with self-reproach.

"Oh, Nick. I'm so sorry, Nick. Please, I am sorry!"

He said, "It's time for lunch." He did not like to be reminded of Emily. It was not right to take it out on Meg, but he couldn't talk much about the sister who had loved him; for whom he had started dealing for Makowsky and the syndicate, to make sure she had everything she needed. He had become Tough Nick inside as well as outside after the dread crippler got her.

Usually when memories of his tender, loving sister welled up within him he could think of nothing else. Only the necessary concentration of the gaming tables could distract him. Now, amazingly, something occurred to him. He looked across the table at Meg Bond.

"You didn't say when you had seen it last. The thing the Perez kids have between them."

"A long time ago. Only once, and then not for long." Her voice was quiet, almost cool. "So I stopped believing in it. Then I saw it again. When you did."

A waitress appeared, local talent, with chewing gum and bad makeup. When they had ordered and the waitress left, Nick said slowly, surprised at his own words, "A thing like that should be let

alone. People so seldom—communicate properly. They begin all right. With the hot stuff, with the big deal. Can't wait and all that. Then what happens? A real fat nothing."

"Yes. Worse than nothing."

"I won't do that. Emily—you see it wasn't only that she was my sister. She had a guy. They were going to be hitched. He was a real nice guy. He had it for Emily, and she had it for him. Then she got polio—and he walked. A thing like that, it scares a guy."

She was listening intently, with more than her ears. She nodded without words, looking at him, understanding. When she spoke in low accents the toughness went out of her voice. "Sure, it scares a guy."

He shook himself, as though to banish a spell. "Then we got to stick around. So let's look at it."

"Those men at city hall. They were in the poker game?"

He told her about that, catching her up on every detail. He elaborated upon his judgement of the men involved, clarifying his own half-thoughts with speech: "The high game I can understand. But there's a couple things. Like if Barber was in the game so deep, how come he answered

my ring so quick last night when we pulled in?"

"That's right. Their game was way in the rear."

Nick nodded. "Also, was Myra Barber, the lady rassler, really in a fainting condition this morning?"

"I'd say she wasn't. *Why* wasn't she?"

"I don't know the answers, baby, only the questions. Like what happened to Perez's knife? If his shiv was used for the trick, why wasn't it left on the spot to tie him in closer? And where did he get the money they found on him? And is it true Mrs. B. was his pal and Bull disliked him? And how come Hayden, a banker, sits in such a high stakes layout? And what axe is Joe Sloan trying to grind? Why is he so palsy with us? Finally, do the others really want to pin it on Perez, or is he merely the handiest pigeon?"

She asked curiously, "How come you talk like a cop, Nick?"

THE waitress brought ham and eggs and coffee and hot rolls. Nick passed the butter and grinned sheepishly. "There was a cop in my outfit. A good joe. We talked a lot. It was a kick, you know? Me, talking to a cop. He

felt the same way. There's a lot of time for talk in Service. We figured that basically we thought alike, worked the same angles. Only I made the buck, he always complained. We were going to open a joint in Jersey after the war. He had it wired in Jersey."

"Why didn't you?"

Nick looked down at his plate. This was a bad day for a cool card player. He muttered, "He made it. Big casino. They give me a damn medal, and he made it."

After a moment she said in her new, soft voice, "Looks to me like you're only lucky at cards, Nick."

"Eat," he said. The hot food helped, and he found himself looking at Meg, watching her handle her knife and fork with natural grace, chewing her food like a good little girl. He wondered about her beginnings, before her life broke up, before the man had taken away that shining thing from her.

He thought again of Andy Perez and the astonishingly beautiful young girl who was his wife. He began to go over the angles which might cause Andy to shut up about the money, to have a brief second when he was afraid to speak. He kept coming back

to the knife, the murder weapon. The setup seemed screwy.

Meg said, "You haven't said a word for a half hour."

"I was thinking." He pushed back his plate and waved to the waitress. He glanced at a tab for a dollar and ninety cents, put down a five-dollar bill and started to rise.

Meg said, "Wait for your change. They're giving us the big eye now. A tip like that would petrify the town."

He left fifty cents. They walked back onto Main Street.

Joe Sloan's dusty car pulled to the curb. The cop said in his slow accents, "Hop in. I got to pick up those pictures I took. Then I want that statement. Then we'll go back to the motel."

Meg and Nick got in, and waited while Sloan went into a corner drug store. He came out again, carrying an ordinary advertising envelope with the valuable prints in it.

Back at the city hall, they all walked into a tiny office on the ground floor. Sloan examined the prints with a magnifying glass while Nick typed up a statement on a battered Underwood. Sloan barely glanced at the page, gave it back for signature, then tossed

it into a wire basket on a cluttered desk.

Nick ventured, "I don't see the State law."

"Yeah. I only got 'til tonight. Then if I don't send for 'em, there'll be war." He offered the prints to Nick. "Want to take a look? I'm havin' blow-ups made, but I wanted these fast."

They were exceptionally good pictures. Meg drew in her breath at a close view of the body, but examined each of them as Nick used the glass.

"See anything?" asked Sloan.

Nick shrugged. "Maybe. I know I've seen plenty guys make it. All ways. Shrapnel, rifle, bayonet, flame-throwers. I never saw a big, strong man laid out so peaceful."

"Leave it to a gamblin' man to have a sharp eye," Sloan said to Meg. "Bull never knew what hit him."

"Stabbed in the heart and didn't see it coming?"

"Could be. Hundred to one, but could be."

"I like it another way," said Nick.

Sloan was fumbling on the desk among the piles of junk. He came out with an application blank for California license plates. "You better fill this out and gimme some dough. I'll put the new

plates on when the paint job dries. You can take on out then. That Vegas heat will be right in here on your tail."

Meg looked up from the last photograph. She demanded hotly, "Why don't you turn that Perez boy loose, Officer? You know he didn't do it."

Sloan cocked an eye at her and remained silent.

Nick said, "Meg, darling. Sign the application."

She said hotly, "You talk and talk but you don't do anything, either of you!"

"Sign, please?" Nick thrust the pen in her hand, gripping her left elbow. She signed with shaking hand.

Sloan folded the papers, said, "I'll have them ready this evenin'. Reckon you better think about leavin' town."

"Yeah. Maybe we'd better," said Nick. He still held Meg's elbow.

"After all, you're standin' ain't so good. Not bein' married and all that." Sloan's voice was flat.

"Who says we're not married?"

Sloan tapped the licence application. "Name of Margaret Bond. Made out last month. You couldn't be married long."

"You want to see the license?" bluffed Nick.

"I don't want no more trouble than we got. That's all. I don't want Vegas heat in here on top of what I got."

Nick said, "These people walking around town looking like they mean business. What about them?"

Sloan's fat face altered. "That's what I mean. I got enough trouble. You can see it."

"I can see that Perez could be lynched, the murder left on him for all to believe."

Sloan said wearily, "Why don't you meander along, Crater? I could send your new license plates to you."

"We'll stick awhile. Maybe I got a hole card. Maybe you'll be glad we didn't blow."

"I'll take you out to the motel," said Sloan evasively. He had weakened at the reference to a possible lynching bee, Nick thought.

Nick kept thinking about that as they went back to Barber's place, and into the cabin. Meg was silent. Nick wondered what she was turning over in her mind. His hand still hurt but he wished he had a deck of cards. He said so, aloud.

Meg reached under the bed and pulled out a suitcase. She suddenly bent again, staring. Her

voice came, muffled, "Nick! Someone's been in here."

"They made up the beds," he pointed out.

"They're not so neat they clean under them every day," she said. She yanked out the other bags, piled them on the bed. Her face was flushed from the exertion, she looked young and intense and, he noted, prettier than ever. She unlatched the top case. She cried, "I'm the neat type, Nick. This bag has been searched."

5

SHE took everything out, throwing him a new deck of cards, going over each item. She picked out an object wrapped in a tea towel. Wordlessly she handed it to Nick, her eyes glowing.

He knew what it was before he unwrapped it. "Hoped we'd carry it out of town," he muttered. "This is getting as clear as aces back to back."

He stared at the switch knife. There were initials on it: *A. P.* There were tiny bloodstains in the haft, where the cops would look first.

She said, "Andy Perez couldn't have planted it here."

"No. But anyone else could have. Anybody can get into these

cabins. Too many master keys—the maid, the owners, all kinds of people. The thing is, *why* was it planted?”

“Why, like you said. For us to get it out of town.”

“But why?”

She thought a moment. “Because it would convict Andy? Doesn’t make sense, does it?” She was unlatching another bag. From it she took another towel, a bath towel this time, and carefully unrolled it. An automatic pistol and a clip of spare cartridges fell upon the counterpane.

Nick said, “Nice toys you carry.”

“When Buster got fresh, I lifted it.”

“Buster! I’d forgotten all about Buster!”

She said quietly, “You and me. The quick-buck kids. We forgot about Buster.”

He picked up the pistol. It was a .38 in a well-oiled condition. There was a clip in the magazine. He put the spare in his coat pocket. “I find I got a few ideas. Let’s make a move.”

“Did you see the little Perez kid? Fat, chubby, not knowing what it is all about. Crawling around, happy as a bug.”

“I saw him.”

“And the girl just as helpless, knowing.”

Nick said, “We’ll take a long walk, while I think.”

She relatched the bags. While she attended to her make-up Nick went across to the office. He found Mrs. Barber staring at a wall, her mouth a tight line, her hands idle.

He said, “You gave Andy the money, didn’t you?”

She did not look at him. “I’m scared. Sloan scared me.”

“You’re not really scared. Just baffled. You gave Andy the money. Bull left the game to cache some of his winnings with you. That’s when he was so prompt to let me in. But when Andy lost you slipped some of it back to him.”

“The baby. Angelina. . . . Andy was always a slob for poker. He played it well, but he had bad luck. I warned him.”

“That’s all I wanted to know,” said Nick. “You want to go downtown with us? We’re walking. You could drive and park outside Sloan’s garage.”

“Park?”

“You know they’re going to try to lynch Andy. What do you think that would do to Angelina and the baby?”

“Someone’s stirring up the people,” she said dully. “Sloan is—

I'm not sure—I don't know about Sloan."

"We're walking," said Nick. "I've got a gun. You'll have to figure it out for yourself."

He went out. Meg was waiting for him. They began to walk to town. The automatic felt good, tucked into his waistband. He looked down at the girl and said, "Buster could find us without any news picture, you know."

"I already thought of that." She had donned low-heeled shoes which made her a good deal shorter than he. She walked briskly. "Nick—what's good and what's bad?"

"You're asking me?"

"I haven't been good."

He surprised himself by saying vehemently, "Nobody's been all good. Don't go around saying things against yourself."

"Today I don't feel bad," she said. "Somehow I don't feel at all bad today."

He slowed his pace, watching a nondescript car pass them. He had hoped it was Mrs. Barber. It was Asa Pine, the farmer. A moment later, another newer car sped by. Rance Hayden was at the wheel, bent low, his face intent.

Nick said carefully, "Bad, good, it sometimes makes little differ-

ence—is that what you mean?"

"Maybe it is. Maybe it all evens up. We are in bad trouble, Nick. Real bad. If we were recognized back in Barstow—anywhere along the line—Buster'll be here."

"That's right." The automatic didn't feel so good when he thought about a car full of hoodlums with sub-machine guns.

Meg said determinedly, "And we're not going to leave Andy Perez in that jail to be lynched. That's more trouble."

"Plenty of it."

She looked brightly up at him. "What are the odds, Nick?"

"I wouldn't take any." He grinned. "It's a bet you can only lay the odds."

"Well—maybe that'll help clear up the bad things," she said. "Because we're sure taking the odds."

They had come to the edge of town. There were more people than before. Some of them looked rough enough and mean enough to break into a jail and murder a defenseless boy. Nick knew little about mob spirit, but he could feel danger in the air. It was a beautiful day but the sun did not brighten the sullen faces of these laborers and drifters and people who did not seem to belong to the town.

SOMEONE was stirring them up. Myra Barber had known that. There was still no sign of Myra's automobile. Nick and Meg paused at Sloan's Garage. The paint job was finished. The Merc looked real nice with its black body and white top. Nick paid the bill and got a receipt.

While the little man was writing the receipt, Nick stepped outside, picked open his money pocket, and took out a couple of large bills. He put them in his trousers. When they left the garage, he led Meg to the bank.

He changed the bills at a teller's window. He could see into a glassed-in office where two men conferred, their heads together. They were Mayor Hayden and Asa Pine. He would have given all the money he had on him to know what they were talking about.

Meg said, "The crowd is getting together in bunches."

"That's the way the game begins."

"Sloan must be at the jail."

"Oh, sure. He'll be there."

They walked across the street to the city hall. Nick was worrying now about Myra Barber. He ran over everything in his mind. It could be one of two ways, he

thought, and either was bad. It depended on why Myra had faked that faint on discovery of Bull's body; on the reason the knife had been planted in Meg's suitcase; on the relationships among the people who had been present at the motel last night. He could not be certain about it.

He could still get out of town. The Merc was ready, no one would stop him. He found himself looking down the street every once in awhile in case a large Cad full of gunsels might appear. The bunches of people were growing, their talk was becoming loud.

Meg said, "You think we better go inside, Nick?"

"You ought to get the hell out. Why don't you get the Merc warmed up and stay in the garage? We might have to go away fast."

She grinned at him. "You're just saying that. You know I won't do it."

He said, "Maybe Sloan will give you a gun. Is that what you want?"

"It doesn't matter," she told him. "Just so I stick."

He understood. She had to have her chance to be useful. They went inside the city hall and immediately he was glad she had stayed around. Angelina and

the baby were in Sloan's office.

Sloan's fat face was lined with care. He stared dully at them and said, "The turnkey took off. I can't get a deputy to serve."

"Somebody tied up the town," said Nick.

Meg was staring at Sloan. "You're scared. You don't know who killed him. Or you do know—and that scares you."

Nick added, "Or you're afraid that you know."

They were suddenly aware that there was no sunshine in the office. Angelina and the baby shrunk together, like a statue in a museum, mother and child, huddled mute.

"There's a hundred people out there," said Meg. "Somebody got 'em in the mood. Someone talked to them."

Sloan got up from behind the desk. His weight sagged on his bones. He wore a Frontier Colt revolver in an old-fashioned cartridge belt which dragged at his pants. He opened a closet with a key, and took out a rifle and a sawed-off shotgun.

Nick said, "Emotions. The whole thing is running off the way people feel. Not what they know. Not even what they think. Somebody got to them."

Sloan was loading the weapons.

Meg picked up the shotgun, examined it. Her hands were small, but the fingers were strong, curving on the stock of the shotgun. "I can handle this. I went hunting once or twice."

"It's got an awful kick," said Nick. He was thinking again. There was something about the poker game, the players. "Look out for the recoil."

Meg went over and touched Angelina's shoulder. In the eyes of the young mother there was hopelessness. She had no words, only the realization of her inability to help.

"Somebody made the people scared and mad," said Nick. "Somebody planted Andy's knife on us. It don't fit together like it should, but I make it that whoever planted the knife did not kill Bull Barber."

Sloan looked up from the rifle. "Planted the knife?"

"In our bags," said Nick. "So we'd carry it away."

Sloan said heavily, "You know Myra gave Andy the dough?"

There was a crash of thunder, presaging one of those quick California storms which can cause so much wreckage in so short a space of time.

Nick said, "Myra and Bull. Were they happy together?"

Sloan lifted one shoulder. "Who's happy? They got along."

"Money. There was money involved. It's got to be the money," said Nick. His mind was whirling.

The sound of many voices came like a second thunderclap. A growling voice yelled, "Sloan! Send him out."

Sloan hefted the rifle expertly. He leaned it against the wall. He loosened the revolver in its holster.

The voices chorused, "Send him out, Sloan."

Nick could not look at the mother and child. He had to think it through. He didn't know enough about the people.

He kept going back to the poker game. He said, "Bull wasn't a good winner. How long had he been a winner?"

"Too long. He had us all hooked," muttered Sloan.

"The money goes round and round," said Nick. "When it stops going around a game like yours is poison."

"I'm tryin' to think." Sloan's voice had gained a little power.

"You're worried about Myra Barber," said Nick suddenly.

It did not rain at once. The sky darkened and the crowd grew and the noise of the crowd was bestial,

awful, not like people gathered together, more like a zoo in a thunderstorm. The Bronx, Nick remembered, when he was a kid, the Bronx Zoo. He looked at Meg. She wasn't scared, just tense, holding the shotgun easily, color in her cheeks.

A couple of quick-buck kids, she had called them. Not such kids any longer, either. Think, Nick, think hard.

Glass crashed, a rock tumbled clumsily on the floor. Sloan's hand went to his gun butt, then he shook his head. "Can't shoot until we got to."

Nick said, "Get the kid."

"You crazy?" Sloan stared at him. "Give them a sight of him and they'd charge us."

"Get him," said Nick. He produced his automatic. "We'll take the mother and the baby, too."

"You don't know them people!" Sloan exploded. "The way they are—there's field workers who hate Mexicans worse'n poison out there."

Nick said, "They'll charge us sooner or later. Get the kid."

Sloan stood a long moment staring at him. "Crater, if you know who did it, tell me. I can stop them if you know."

"I don't know," said Nick. "Get the kid."

Sloan slumped again. He went out of the room. Angelina got to her feet, holding the child, watching the door through which Andy must come, her whole life on her face.

Meg was looking out the window. "It's one big bunch now. How can people be like this?"

"Someone got to their emotions," said Nick. "This is no poker game. This is like the wheel, Meg. Like when someone has a few drinks and starts scatterin' the chips. Crazy."

"Crazy," she repeated.

He said, "Okay. We'll be crazy, too." He could tell by Angelina's little cry that Sloan had brought Andy. "Your car, Sloan. We get to it, see? And we get to our car, the Merc. Then we slam out of town until they cool off. Then I'll give you the guy who killed Bull."

"Suppose we don't make the car?"

Andy Perez spoke quickly, "It is better to die in the open."

Nick said, "If you don't want to go, Sloan, cover us from here. You can do that much."

Sloan growled something and went past them. He threw open the door. His bulk almost filled it as he faced the crowd, the rifle in his hands.

The growl ceased for a moment. Meg had Angelina by the arm, pushing her. Andy went to her and took the baby. Sloan moved out into the darkening day. Nick slid to the opposite side of the little group, holding the automatic.

"Don't run," he cautioned. "Easy does it."

The sullen-faced crowd was taken by surprise. The group moved toward the parked car, sauntering, watching. There was a thick silence and there was not much air to breathe. Nick saw movement to the rear and heard a voice:

"Don't let 'em get away! Grab 'em!"

Sloan had reached the car. He swung Angelina into it. Andy handed in the baby and followed, into the rear seat. Some fool fired a shot.

Nick dropped to one knee. Meg was alongside him. Sloan staggered, but still did not fire. There was a flurry of shots. Nick yelled, "Behind you! Look behind you!"

6

THE black Cadillac was rushing onto the crowd. Nick could have roared with laughter if he had

not been too busy with his eyes and his brain and the automatic in his hand. The people were attacked from two sides. They swung about uncertainly and Buster's boys were driving the Cad right through. A man went down and rolled—and the people spread, panicked.

Meg let loose the sawed-off greener. The roar was conclusive. Nick threw two accurate shots at the front tires of the Cad and dragged Meg back with him. Sloan had the revolver out and was hip-shooting the rifle with the other hand.

At the last possible second the Cad swerved. A door flew open. Nick shot into the open door. Meg let loose the other barrel of the shotgun into the open door.

Sloan was bleeding but he walked forward, firing at the Cad. Buster fell out and began running. Sloan shot him behind the right knee and Buster's screams were like a banshee, piercing the uproar of the crowd.

Nick said, "Meg! This way."

On the edge of the crowd, Nick had spotted two men making their escape. They ran into a grove of fruit trees. He began running after them.

Suddenly he stopped. Meg stopped beside him.

Myra Barber had appeared. She had one of the men in a hiplock, her skirts swirling, her magnificent legs widespread as she swung her victim. His feet described an arc and struck a revolver from the hand of the second man. Then she had them both. The gun went flying, and Nick retrieved it.

She pivoted and the head of one man banged against the head of the other. Both went to earth with a crash.

Meg said, "Gee, I wish I could do that!"

Myra Barber said, slightly out of breath, "Guess you thought I'd run out."

"I couldn't be sure," said Nick. "I figured Bull had broke the game. But it could have been Sloan. Or you could have been tired of Bull."

Behind them the crowd had simmered down. A voice yelled, "Where are Asa and Rance?"

Myra Barber called, "Right here. That you, Colly?"

"The Boss is hurt," came the voice of the little man from the garage. "Folks is askin' about Asa and Rance."

Myra said, "Help me drag 'em in."

They helped. They got the wealthy farmer and the banker-

mayor back to the city hall steps and dropped them there. Sloan was trying to stop the bleeding of a hole in his shoulder with Andy's aid.

Nick took the shotgun. He gave Meg the automatic.

The Cadillac was a wreck. Buster lay moaning in the dirt. Nick went over to him and poked him with the shotgun. "Nice timin', Bus. Thanks a lot."

Buster was beyond anything but the pain. Nick looked at a couple of the wide-eyed, stunned people. There was the siren of an ambulance somewhere in the town. Nick said, "Better start cleanin' up the mess and be glad it ain't worse. Hayden and Pine killed Bull. He hit them so bad in the poker game they got into the bank's funds and there was an examiner due. They tried to plant it on Andy Perez."

They understood him, all right. They turned to tell their neighbors. He heard, "Hey, did you hear that? Hey, Johnny, get a load of this!" It spread like all gossip. It spread just as good as the lies Hayden and Pine had been telling.

A doctor paid first attention to Sloan, in the office. When he had left to look after the other injured, Nick said, "You two,

Myra and you, Sloan, you almost garbaged up the works."

Neither seemed willing to respond.

"Sloan thought Myra might have done it. Myra thought he might have, because Bull was getting too big for his britches and Sloan is mighty fond of Myra. So Myra grabbed the knife before she yelled for help, pretended to faint, then hid it on us. Sloan or Andy, Myra didn't want either to take the rap. Myra's got a big heart but she's a lady rassler. It takes time for her to think past the immediate action."

Myra said contritely, "I was all the way to the garage, like you said, when I got to thinking that Asa was into the bank for a big loan. And Rance had been so nervous lately that he couldn't tell the time of day."

"I lost the knife during the game," Andy offered. "I must have. But how could they get the best of Bull?"

"He was slugged," said Sloan. "The autopsy showed he was slugged behind the ear. So—anyone could have done it." He looked sheepishly at Nick. "Like you say—I was scared."

"None of us are too bright and we were workin' at loggerheads," said Nick. "Like you knew Bull

had been knifed before you even saw the body. Took me a long while to figure that while Myra was pulling that fake faint she called you up."

Sloan said, "Asa and Rance weren't too bright, either. They got the people started because they were scared when the knife didn't show up. Asa hires a lot of workers, it was easy for him to start things. Rance, bein' mayor, swings a lot of weight around here. I mean, he *did* swing it."

"See if he can swing himself out of the gas chamber," Nick suggested. "Myra caught them cold, trying to get away. I heard Hayden's voice, trying to get the crowd started on us."

"So did I," said Myra. "I cut through the orchard so I could come up on 'em."

"And Buster rode right into it," chuckled Nick. "That was the best part, when he stampeded the mob. I liked that part."

Meg said, "I liked the part best where Myra conked the two guys. That's the part I liked."

Nick took her by the arm. He said, "Never mind about that. I've got words for you."

When they were in the Merc, Meg said, "But Nick, we've got to stick around."

Nick asked, "Look, you want

to go back to the motel and live in sin? You forget something else about this State. Takes four days to get certificate and everything."

She grabbed at his hand. "No, Nick. Not like this. You caught all the excitement."

"Fifty grand," he said. "A trip to Honolulu. We go up this road to Reno, we get married. We duck over to San Francisco and take a ship. We get a new start."

"You don't really want to." The tears finally were being shed and she looked like a young girl, any young girl, only very pretty and with a special something he had not known in any other girl.

He said, "I want to prove two wrongs can make a right."

When he kissed her he realized that he had been wanting to ever since they had left Vegas, ever since she had looked at him on the road, when she had been lost and hurt but not scared, driving the Merc like a veteran. He wondered if there was much square gambling in Honolulu? Maybe they could open a small place of their own, a quiet place.

Maybe— He was caught in a rush of tenderness as the girl crept close to him and slid her arms around him. He had never felt like this before. Anything might happen!



by JOHN D. MACDONALD

SCARED MONEY

Harry Varney's big phony front didn't help him much —when he rode down a pedestrian.

HE DROVE fast through the night, thinking of that last hand. Damn that Devlan, suggesting raising the limit for that last hand. As though he knew he was

going to get the case ace in the hole. It had been a long and very expensive hand. As he drove, Harry Varney figured he had dropped forty dollars on that last hand. Poker seemed to be getting too rich for his blood, lately. The disastrous last hand had left him with almost an eighty dollar deficit for the evening.

And that was too much. Way too much. He remembered with self-contempt the elaborate casualness with which, as the game broke up and as Dick Winkler was paying off the chip stacks from the bank, he had suggested to Devlan that they cut high card for twenty dollars. Devlan, he knew, had not been deceived. But Devlan, as big winner, couldn't very well refuse.

Harry Varney remembered the bright light shining down on the green table top. The others were over putting their coats on. He remembered his own hand reached out, taking a thin cut, remembered the hot good feeling as he turned the thin stack just enough so that he caught a glimpse of the spade jack. But Devlan, almost contemptuously, had cut the remaining cards, flipped over the heart king. And Harry Varney, taking the last two tens out of his wallet, instinc-

tively turned so that Devlan could not see the two remaining bills—two lonely and ineffectual one-dollar bills left out of the hundred dollars he had taken to the club with such high hopes at eight o'clock.

"Guess you've had one of those nights, Harry," Devlan had said.

For a moment Varney had been tempted to suggest another cut for twenty dollars. Devlan couldn't know that the wallet was nearly empty. But a thing like that—should he lose—betting without the stake, could mean being barred from the game. So he had said, as casually as possible, "You boys bruised me a little tonight."

Bruised, hell! Izozel, when she found out about it, as she inevitably would, was going to be merciless. He could hear her thin voice: "Oh, you have to be the big shot! You have to, don't you? Swagger and brag and throw your money around. I hope you can remember what we owe."

Last year he had won pretty consistently. Last year, of course, when he didn't have to win. Now he played with scared money. And the damn fool thing tonight had been to sign for those drinks at the club. Six rounds was it, or seven? Seven—by the way the yel-

Scared Money

low line down the middle of the highway kept turning into two lines. Vision was better if he kept one eye shut.

Losing the Taylor account had been the advertising agency's first blow. For years it had accounted for almost half his income. Things seemed to be getting worse at the agency, and Izobel seemed to become shriller every day.

There was a dull anger in him at the way things seemed to be closing in. The poker crowd could sense it all right. They could smell scared money. He remembered what had happened to Stolts last year, remembered the night that Stolts had been banker, and had kept dipping into the bank chips so that at the end of the evening he couldn't pay off all the way around. And Stolts had given Devlan a check that later turned out to be bad. Harry Varney remembered last year, how he had told Dick and Devlan that if Stolts showed again, it would be better to tell him he couldn't play.

The club dues were overdue, and the bill would be fat this month. It made him feel cold inside, the way things were going. The check he'd cashed, for a hundred, took the balance down. Way

down, and he didn't dare enter it in the check book, not with Izobel using the joint account. He'd cashed a counter check.

His face felt thick and sweaty and he felt faintly ill from the drinks. He was driving fast. He decided he would open the front window vent so as to direct a blast of the cool air at his face. It was three in the morning, and the highway ahead was empty. He looked away from the road for a fraction of a second as he reached for the handle to open the vent. When he looked back he saw the flick of movement so startlingly close that he did not have time to either swerve or get his foot onto the brake pedal before he felt the sick solid thump of sixty-mile-an-hour metal hitting flesh.

He got the brake on far too late. The car swerved and he fought the wheel; got the big, expensive, mortgaged car under control. He drove off onto the shoulder and managed to stall the engine. Far down the road, coming toward him, he saw the twin headlights, the smaller high lights of a truck. With an instinctive secrecy, he turned off his own lights, and sat in the darkness. The truck droned by him, the motor noise changing to a minor

key as it swept by. The wind it generated rocked his car a little, and he heard the truck sound die away in the distance.

The instinct to drive away and not look back was almost too strong. At last, he took the flashlight from the glove compartment, got heavily out of the car. His brain had been shocked into complete sobriety, but his legs still felt drunk and unwieldy.

He stood in the night for a few moments, a big man with a salesman's face and a soft waistline. He went around in front of the car and listened for traffic sound. There was none. He heard the far-off metallic honk of a diesel train. He held the light on his front right fender. It was smashed in, almost against the tire thread.

The heavy bumper guard was canted back, the headlight smashed, its chrome rim bent. A good forty or fifty dollars worth, he thought, realizing as the thought came into his mind that it was incongruous. He bent closer, but he could see no blood, or fabric or hair on the crumpled metal.

He straightened up, and turned off the flash as he heard a car coming. It seemed to take a long time. It went by him at a sedate speed, an old car with high

square lines. They had had one just like it, he remembered. Years ago, when Izobel had been less shrill. How many cars since then? Six, seven at least. It was necessary to keep up appearances. You couldn't call on an account driving an old heap.

All this was delaying what he knew he had to do. Someone might be back there, bleeding badly, dying. You had to stop, even if you ran over a dog. It was a cold night. The ruts of the soft shoulder were frozen. He found the place of impact. The bits of broken headlight glass winked coldly in the starlight.

The twin black lines of rubber picked up a few feet beyond the point of impact and continued for at least forty feet. He put the light on the glass. The road was empty. The shoulder was empty. There was a wetness on the frozen ruts. It looked black in the white beam of the flashlight.

He found the body in the shallow ditch beyond the shoulder, half concealed in the tall dead winter weeds. He held the light on the dead face, and then turned it off. Two cars went by and he stood with his back to the highway. It was the body of an old man. There was no doubt of death. None. The body wore lay-

ers of ragged sweaters. The shoes were broken. The open mouth exposed toothless gums. Over the smell of the liquor in his own system, Harry Varney could detect the alcohol reek of the body.

IT WASN'T fair. Not fair; for it to have been this old bum. This useless wandering nobody. Killing this one was almost doing him a favor. He suspected that, sober, he could have carried it off. It would have been a little difficult, of course, because they could measure his skid marks and approximate his speed, but he was used to dealing with people, perfectly aware of his own ability to sell himself. But driving while drunk, at three in the morning—he knew he couldn't pass the drunkometer test, walk any chalk line. It was frightening to be so coldly sober inside, while the body weaved and staggered. An old bum, tanked to the ears, wandering out into a public highway.

When he heard the next truck coming, he stepped across the ditch and squatted in the field behind the screen of weeds. The law had ways of finding out. They had their damn microscopes and their spectroanalysis. He hated the old man for being dead. It

wasn't fair. Even the minimum penalty would be impossible—a suspension of his driving license. He had to have the car and be able to use it. Hiding the body would be no good. He couldn't risk taking the car into any repair garage, not looking like that, not with the bashed place so evidently made by a human body.

Still squatting, even after the truck had gone by, he hit his knee with his fist. Think, Varney. Think, damn you. If you never did before, use your head now. And to think that you were complaining about losing a hundred bucks! Life had turned sour, you thought. In retrospect, it was a delightful life.

Slowly the plan began to form in his mind. He began to have that good hot feeling in his throat, that same feeling as when he had caught a glimpse of the spade jack.

He went out without the flashlight lit, and painfully picked up the little glinting bits of glass. Twice he had to lumber back to cover as cars went by, moving fast. He made a hasty check with the flashlight and located one more fair-sized piece. The remaining glass dust he scuffed off the highway with the edge of his shoe. He was tempted to throw

the glass into the weeds, and then decided they might be suspicious if they did not find enough glass. He hurried to the car and carefully placed the glass fragments inside the broken right headlight. The chrome ring retained them. He backed down the highway quickly and pulled off onto the shoulder near the body, and turned off his lights.

He dragged the body to the car, let go of it, got the door open, then got it up into the seat. It was disconcertingly slack. It toppled over against the wheel. He rolled the window down, reached through and pulled it back so that it leaned, instead, against the door. Starlight was pale on the old broken face, the stained matted hair. On a hunch he searched the area carefully and was enormously glad he had done so. He found a bulging old suitcase tied with rope, a shapeless felt hat. He put the felt hat on the head, opened the back door and set the suitcase in on the floor.

He got behind the wheel and waited until a car went by before turning his own lights on and starting out. The body toppled over against him and he pushed it away with a sudden panic that made him breathe hard.

He drove cautiously, rehearsing his lines. "It was a cold night, and I guess I just felt sorry for the old guy, seeing him there, trying to hitch a ride. I was sorry as soon as he got in the car. He was drunk and noisy. It happened when he reached over and grabbed the wheel and yanked so that it steered us right into—tree, pole, what have you. Smashed hell out of my car. That's what I get for trying to be a nice guy. Me? Oh, I had a couple of drinks at the club, but I had the car under control until he grabbed the wheel that way."

He drove slowly, aware of the body propped up near him, yet careful not to look at it. Just bang hell out of that front right corner of the car. Smash it up good. And open the door and tumble the old guy out, then stop the next car. It would have to be a place where a good solid tree grew close enough to the road. He peered ahead. A car came in sight in the distance, rounding a curve. That curve might be a good place, he decided. It would look right. Who would examine the car for evidence of two accidents? One impact would disguise the previous one. He dimmed his lights for the oncoming car, put

them back on high when he was by it. As he looked ahead, he noticed out of the corner of his eye, in the rear view mirror, that the car he had just passed was swinging around in a U-turn.

Harry Varney held tightly to the wheel, staring into the rear vision mirror. Somebody forgot something. Somebody changed their mind. That was all. That had to be all.

He saw the headlights coming up behind him and he suddenly saw the big red light on top of the car flick on, heard the warning touch of the siren in a low register. He jammed the accelerator down to the floor. The big car jumped ahead. He drove with his mouth open, sagging. His lips felt numb. The siren made a high screaming sustained sound. His big car rocked with the speed and he knew it was time to turn it into the trees that lined the road, but he could not force himself to do it at that speed.

The police sedan came up beside him, and all of the nerve went out of Harry Varney. He began to pump the brake. They stopped ahead of him, put a swivel searchlight bright in his face. He squinted and he saw them coming back, two of them, tall and young, guns drawn.

One of them approached on his side. "Out, Mister. Get out fast, and hands in the air."

As Harry Varney got out, he heard the other patrolman at the other side of the car. "You too, Pop. Out."

The one in front of Harry said, "Turn around and keep those hands up, Mister."

The other one said, in an entirely new tone of voice, "George, take a look at this. George, you got to take a look at this."

Harry stood, hands high. He kept his eyes shut, but the bright spotlight shone pink through his closed lids. He heard them talk in low tones. His arms were getting tired. His head ached. He felt sick again.

"Why did you come after me?" he asked. "Why?" His voice sounded thin in his own ears. Sharp and thin like Izobel's.

He felt the wallet being taken out of his hip pocket. There was no answer to his question. He asked it again.

One of the patrolmen said: "Because, Mr. Varney, or whoever you are, we got a law in this state. We're nice guys. We were only going to warn you. In this state when you drive at night you got to have both headlights working."

The slashing killer had a weakness
for horror movies . . . good gin, and bad girls.



FEVER STREET

by BRYCE WALTON

EVEN the *Graphic* reporter couldn't look into the room again. "No leads?" he asked.

"Hell, it just happened," I said.

"Okay, okay! But it's happened before."

"Sure, more than once."

"Looks like the same kind of job."

"All butcher shops look about the same," I said.

"I've got a sense of humor, officer, but—"

"Go ask Captain Burkson," I said. "Ask him. This is his meat."

"Burkson! You kidding?" The reporter sneered. "A real buzzard, that guy is. He should've stayed in retirement."

I wasn't listening to the reporter anyway. I should have been in charge of this case, and it was important to me. But the D.A. had brought Burkson back out of retirement, like a thin dark ghost. And I didn't like Captain Burkson any better than the reporter did.

I had to admit one thing though, Burkson was slicing into this thing like an eager razor, no wasted motion, and he sure knew what he was doing.

I glanced into the cheap room again. A flashbulb popped off. I saw the stained knife on the rumpled bed. The rest of it was too strong for my taste.

I went down the dim hallway and under the fly-specked yellow bulb to where Burkson was bending over the cleaning woman like a vulture. She was a short bulky

Mexican woman. Her eyes were glazed with shock. She just kept sighing and muttering prayers.

"Ah, the hell with her!" Burkson said impatiently as he swung around and yelled at Halloran who stood by the door. "You, what's your name?"

"Halloran, sir."

"Take her to Headquarters, Halloran. Have Martinez ask her questions. Tell him to get a description from her, if she can remember seeing anything."

"Yes, sir."

I leaned over the rickety railing and watched Halloran guiding her down the stairs.

Burkson was looking directly at me out of bright black eyes. "You said you were Lieutenant Maxson?"

"That's right, Carl Maxson."

He gripped my arm as he passed. "This'll be rough, Carl. Real rough. Better pick up some benxies. We're not going to be getting much sleep for a while."

He was moving toward the room like a lean eager shadow. "Come on, Carl. Let's have another look."

I went in. My stomach felt nervous.

"All right, everybody out," Burkson said sharply. "The hell

with the pictures. Who needs pictures? Out, everybody!"

His manner was abrupt to say the least, but those guys were only too glad to get out. I envied them as they hurried out and down the stairs.

"Shut the door, Carl," Burkson said.

I pushed on the door with the tip of my finger until it clicked.

He was standing in the middle of the room, and then he started turning slowly, looking at every detail, carefully, item by item. His suit was black and shiny and tight around his rail-like body, and his rust-colored hair was graying. He seemed to be trembling inside as he stood there, like a high bred bird-dog given the scent.

Then he went over and looked out the window, angling his body a little so he could see past the wall of brick and at a neon sign blinking over the roofs.

"This time I'm wrapping it up," he said softly.

"This time?"

"I thought you knew about it." Burkson said. "My retirement and everything."

"All I know is you've stepped in."

"No hard feelings I hope."

I shrugged.

"Forget it," he said. "You'll get all the credit you want. Whatever we do, say you did it. What the hell's the difference? This is personal with me. Strictly personal."

I went across past him to the window and started to raise it. I needed air.

"Leave it closed!"

"I just wanted to get some fresh air in here!"

"Don't disturb anything."

"But a little air—"

His eyes were closed. I could barely hear him. "Don't disturb anything. It's in the air, even. You've got to get the real feel of it, and of *him*. You understand? No, you probaby don't, not yet. You will though. But it's in the air."

"It sure as hell is," I said.

He took a cigar out of his shirt pocket, bit off the end, but he didn't light it. Again he started looking the room over.

"Damn near the same," he whispered. "It's the same. I figured it was, that's why I asked the D.A. to let me have one more crack at this butcher boy."

"I guess I should have read the papers more," I said.

He went over and looked at what was left of *her*. "The same," he whispered again. "I know this guy. He crossed his fingers. "Like

that." He touched his shoe to the empty gin bottle on the floor. "His first job was on the Strip and that was six years ago. That part of the Sunset Strip is County, so I got the job. It was a big thing. The Black Rose, that's what the papers made out of it. Didn't have a damn thing to do with the case. Claimed she was found with a rose in her hand, dyed black like her hair. There wasn't any rose at all."

"Six years ago?"

"That's right. I was working out of the County Sheriff's office, and I went to work on it. The city cooperated, but I was handling it personally all the way. There were seven hundred cops, sheriff's deputies and state troopers on it. But the louse didn't do another job after that third one."

"Third one? He did two more?"

"Where the hell have you been, Carl?"

"Like I said, I never read the papers much. Before the war, I lived on the East Coast."

"Well, anyway there were two more. The third one was just six blocks from here."

He bent over the bed and the knife. "They were really riding me then. That's why I retired

right after that. They were going to cut me out."

"You didn't get him."

"No. As you can see." Burkson straightened up and put his head back. His eyes were closed. "He was here tonight."

IT WAS a warm night, but I felt a kind of chill run down my arms. "You seem to be damn certain it's the same guy," I said.

"Absolutely sure. I knew who it was when he pulled the third one."

"Then why—?"

"Everything," he cut in, "I know *everything*—but his name and his address." He jerked the cigar out of his mouth. "Carl, I once set a trap for him. It was like stalking one certain tiger for a long time—and finally you're all staked out waiting for him. You know where he's going to be. I knew approximately where he would be, I knew the circumstances, everything. But he didn't show. I waited and waited—dammit!"

"But you said you knew who he was."

"Yes. I didn't know his name though, nor where he lived. So I called him Joe—and waited. But

Joe never pulled another one. Until now."

"How come the D.A. decided—?"

He cut in fast. "It's a new regime, and I had a long talk with the D.A. I convinced him. I had to convince him. You think I'd miss this chance? Listen, I sat around going over every newspaper there is, every magazine, waiting for him to do it again. One thing I've always known, Carl, sometime he'd do it again."

He rolled the gin bottle, and I heard it clink against something under the bed.

The clinking sound tightened his face into a hard grin."

"There's two more of them under there. Take a look."

I looked under the bed. There were three gin bottles under there.

He said, "There were always three bottles. Same brand, too. King's. He picked up this Jane at the bar half a block down the street, and he bought the gin on the way up here."

"You mean he does all those things the same way every time?"

"That's right. The whole thing's a ritual. Ritual, that's what you call it. I read psychology books, abnormal stuff. I cov-

ered every angle there is. The whole thing is part of a ritual, like gooks over in the bush used to go through when they sacrificed some poor devil to a god or something. Schizophrenics like this, they go through the same ritualistic acts."

"Well, what about our ritual," I asked. "Where do we go from here?"

He didn't seem to have heard my question. "A Jane's what they call a live fetish. And each Jane is the same Jane to him. You see how it is, Carl, same one over and over. Like those nuts washing their hands over and over to wash guilt off. Same hands, same guilt, same Jane—everything the same!"

All at once he turned and started for the door. "Let's go, Carl, let's get into the act."

It was a damp night. A thin drizzle filled the air under the blinking neon. Captain Burkson led me down the west side of skid row past the recreation palace, then the all-night ten-cent movie houses with the life-sized girlie teasers outside, all in black-lace panties and black bras, and black stockings and black high heels.

Burkson stopped and looked at them. A wino jostled at him and mumbled. Burkson dropped a

dime in his hand without taking his eyes off the pictures.

"Take a good long look, Carl. You'll begin to get the feel of it. See, they all look alike too. All the same, just like it is for him."

"Yeah," I said a little thickly. "They all look pretty much alike."

"Is there very much difference between that guy and us? Not much. It's just a matter of degree, you see how that is? Every fellow in there goes in there because he feels something like our boy, Joe. See what I mean?"

"We're all pretty much alike," I said.

"Sure. Listen, I lived and breathed this case. I haven't thought about anything else. How do those big-game hunters really get heads? They come down off their human high chairs and become whatever damn animal they're hunting. With another human being, it's even easier. You see how that is?"

"Sure, I can see that."

"Good. That's fine. I'm glad you're getting the idea, because if you work on through this thing with me to the finish, you've got to get in the mood."

We walked to the next movie-house. It was a triple horror show. The teasers had the same girlies

out there, but they were being handled by a gorilla-man, a wolf-man, and a tattered mummy.

Burkson was taking out his change.

"Captain—"

"We're going in and see the show, Carl."

"That stuff?"

"This is where we start," Burkson said, heading inside without looking back.

I touched his arm just before he got past the ticket-taker.

"I'm off duty in another half an hour," I said. "And anyway, I've seen these movies already."

"But not the way we're going to see them now, Carl. This is a necessary part of the case. This is where Joe always goes—before he does it."

I went back and bought a ticket, and followed Burkson inside. It had that stale suppressing smell of wine, beer, stale smoke, sweat, dirt, the smell of skid row bottled up by a damp summer night.

We stood there a minute.

Burkson was breathing quickly. "The killings always are done within a block of a horror movie, and always on skid row. That first case. She was found on the strip, but it was done a block away from a skid-row horror show just

the same as the other two—and this new one tonight.”

“How do the horror shows figure?”

“It gets Joe in the mood,” Burkson whispered. He was leaning forward a little toward the small dim screen almost completely blurred with cigarette smoke. “You can see how that is. Just forget everything else and try to think like Joe thinks. You look at this and you sit here in the dark thinking about it, and watching all that stuff, and you start getting stirred up. It’s part of the ritual, something like a war-dance maybe.”

“You even know how Joe thinks?” I whispered.

“I know a lot about how Joe thinks. You’ll find out how it works. I was reading about big-game hunters. They get to know how a tiger thinks, how a lion thinks.”

“But the way Joe thinks,” I said, “isn’t as simple as the way a tiger thinks.”

“That’s right. Joe’s more dangerous. A helluva lot worse than anything you wait for in the jungle. Come on, let’s sit down.”

HE WENT down the center aisle. A few guys were snoring with

their heads propped up by their hands. They were good at that. Bums got a nickel here and another nickel there, and then came in to get some sleep. But they knew enough to keep their heads from wobbling so a cop wouldn’t come in and hit it with a club.

“Here, right about here,” Burkson whispered sharply. He had stopped at row five. The first ten rows were practically empty. The screen put a little too much light there to suit most of the kind of customers who patronized the Star Theatre.

The Monster movie was about to end. The Monster was stumbling through a bog carrying the girl.

“This is about where Joe sits,” Burkson said as we sat down.

“You couldn’t know that,” I whispered.

“I know how tall he is, his build, the color of his hair. I’ve run lab tests on strands of his hair; on his skin found under the fingernails of the Janes—”

“But how could you tell—”

“I can tell, Carl. One of the Janes broke his glasses. I had the lenses checked. I know what kind of eyes he has. Just the degree of astigmatism. The lab boys and I worked it all out. That was preliminary stuff. The important

thing is the mood—the feel of it.”

The next movie was starting. Burkson was leaning forward, his hands on the back of the seat in front of him. “He doesn’t see but one of these. Just one.”

“Maybe you know how much he sees? When he leaves?”

“That varies some. But just wait, wait and watch, Carl. I’ll get into it again now.”

After a while, he said, “I figure this is Joe’s hypo scene.” He gripped my arm. “We’ve got to time this scene. I’ll check with the ticket-taker. This is it—for Joe. Right now, he would get up and go out!”

He stood up and slid out into the aisle and walked fast toward the lobby. I followed him. My eyes ached from sitting too close.

While Burkson was getting the schedule from the ticket-taker, I went on outside and took some deep breaths of clean drizzle.

Burkson came out. His eyes were bright and he was chewing on a new cigar. He looked west down skid row, and then he pointed. “See, that’s the rooming house. He wouldn’t use the same one, but one that’s just as close. That one with the O missing in Rooms, see?”

I nodded.

Every joint between the Star

Theatre and the sign saying, *Rooms*, was a bar, sucker joints with B-girls outnumbering the customers about three to one.

I thought of Marge and my kid. They’d be asleep by now. Marge would be sleeping light, waiting for me to come in. She would be up by the time I got halfway into the living room, fixing me a sandwich and a cup of hot chocolate.

Burkson started walking. “Come on, Carl.”

We walked half a block.

Burkson said, “Our Joe would drop into the first bar after the movie. This one, this is it!” He stopped and looked into the sour dimness. In the smoke I could see legs crossed, calling some lonely guy in out of the night.

“He picks up his Jane here, and they have a drink. He doesn’t have much trouble. He’s not bad looking. About five nine, with blond hair, blue eyes, and a fair build. He weighs about one-seventy, and—”

“Hold it a minute,” I said. He turned slowly and looked at me, hardly seeming to see me. “Joe isn’t going to do anything else tonight, at least I can guess that much about him.”

“That’s right. He has to work up to it again.”

"So how about letting me punch out for tonight?"

"Why?"

"My wife and kid are probably worried. I haven't even had a chance to call them. Have you called your—"

He turned away. "I don't have any. A real cop doesn't really have a family, not even if he has one. You see how that is?"

I didn't say anything.

"All right, Lieutenant. You go on home. You meet me here tomorrow at five-thirty. I figure it'll only be a few days before Joe builds up to it again."

I didn't ask him how he knew. I wanted to go home.

We said good night, and I went home. Burkson went on down skid row toward the sign saying, *Rooms*.

I SAT through the triple-horror show in the Star Theatre with Burkson for four nights. Four nights! We were sitting in row five—waiting for Joe.

It was in the middle of the one with the wolf-man when Joe came in.

I nudged Burkson—and then it hit me that *I* had recognized Joe. He stood there at the end of the row in the aisle, and he was

hardly different from any number of others who might have been standing there. I couldn't tell the color of his hair, nor see that he was wearing glasses. But I *knew* it was Joe.

I guess it was working pretty well, this business of getting into the mood, getting the feel of it.

Burkson nodded, then looked at the screen. Out of the corner of my eye I watched Joe move in and sit down just to the right of me. Only one seat separated us. He leaned back. I heard him sigh. I saw him lean forward then, tensely, and put his hands on the back of the seat in front of him.

When his head moved a little I could see the light shining on his glasses.

Burkson had timed it almost to the second when Joe would get up and leave the theatre. We followed Joe. He went into the bar that Burkson had pointed out five nights before. He came out with the Jane. He went into the liquor store Burkson had mentioned. He bought three bottles of King's gin.

We followed them to the narrow opening that went up some dimly lighted stairs under the sign that said, *Rooms* with one *O* missing.

I had this raw feeling like I

had been on benzadrine and hadn't slept for a month. Burkson looked up the stairs and put a new cigar in his mouth. I could hear his sharp rapid breathing. When he turned to look at me, his eyes were shining like glass.

"Let's go up now," Burkson whispered hoarsely.

"We'd better not waste any time either," I said.

"We've got time. First the drinking. He has to work up to it."

"But hell, we've got him now!" I felt about ready to crack. "All we've got to do is—"

"Easy, now, don't get excited," Burkson said. "You'll break the mood."

"All right, but let's get up there!"

"Just take it easy and slow now," Burkson said.

The night man at the flea bag told us that the man we described as Joe had rented room 307. I followed Burkson up there. Burkson had moved fast up until now, but now he was sure taking his time. The third floor hall was like a yellow cave. It smelled of stale grease and disinfectant.

Burkson stooped down and stuck his ear carefully against the door of 307.

I heard the clinking of glass.

Then a long sighing sound behind the door.

I pulled the .38 out of its shoulder holster. I touched Burkson on the shoulder. He didn't move. He didn't look at me. His body was rigid and he didn't seem to be breathing at all.

"Let's go in for God's sake!" I whispered.

He held up his hand for me to be quiet, but he didn't look up at me.

I heard another sound, several sounds. I dug my fingers into Burkson's arm. It was his show, but what the hell was he doing just listening to it?

"Captain—Captain Burkson—"

He didn't move. His ear remained stuck to the door. He didn't look up or say anything, but I heard a kind of wheezing sound come out of his chest.

"We've got to get in there!" I whispered.

His hand came around and touched my wrist. It was icy cold and trembling a little. "Please," he whispered, "Carl, wait, just a few minutes more, wait just a few minutes now, you can see how it is. I mean, after all this time, just a few more minutes, and then—"

"He's killing her!"

"Carl—just a minute—"

Then he looked up at me. His

face was gray. I could see the wrinkles standing out under his eyes. His eyes were bright and his lips were stretched back tight in a kind of a grin.

"Listen, Carl," he whispered as he gripped my wrist tightly with both hands. "What does it matter now? Who is she, anyway? You know what I mean, Carl. Listen—you think about it, and you'll see what I mean. If you'll just take it easy a minute now and don't mess things up—"

I felt his cheek bone slide under my swinging fist, and then I hit the door. I hit it again—and I could feel Burkson's hands drag-

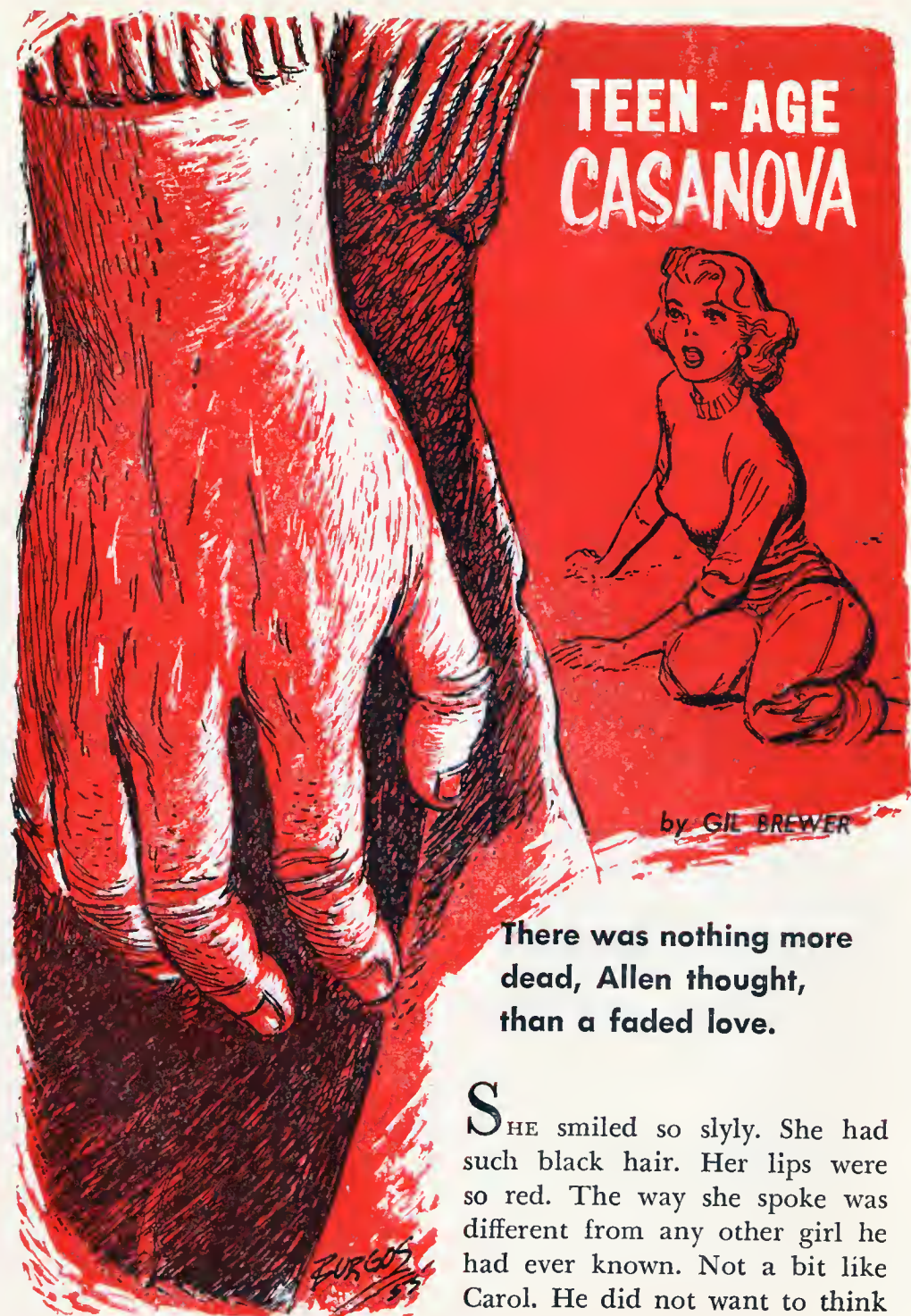
ging at my ankle as I went through the cheap splintering wood.

She was too drunk to care much. Joe looked up at me through his steamed glasses, and then he came at me with the hunting knife.

My first shot knocked him half-way across the room. He was crawling toward the window when I gave him the second one in the head.

When I went out, Burkson was on his knees looking into the room at Joe. I could still hear him sobbing as I went down the stairs to call.





TEEN - AGE CASANOVA

by GIL BREWER

There was nothing more
dead, Allen thought,
than a faded love.

SHE smiled so slyly. She had
such black hair. Her lips were
so red. The way she spoke was
different from any other girl he
had ever known. Not a bit like
Carol. He did not want to think

about Carol. It made him feel wrong about what he was going to do. He wanted only to be with Binnie. It was funny, because he'd only known Binnie for an hour or so, and he had known Carol for three years.

He said to Binnie, "Let's walk down by the lake."

They were standing beside the raised dance pavilion. The sleepy music of Martin Towne's Zypher-Tones roofed the Florida night. Laughter and the sound of shuffling feet flooded down upon them. Beyond the shell of light cast from the pavilion, night birds and insects warred in the pine woods and tangled jungle. Now and then a car's lights went on and off, a souped-up Ford's engine roared.

"All right," Binnie said.

When she spoke, he went all to mush inside. Her voice was tender and reedy and it did things to him.

"We can sit, or something."

"Yes."

He took her arm and they moved down past the lower wall of the pavilion, fronting the lake. She brushed against him. It was a kind of sly movement, like everything else about her, and it drove him wild.

She was so pretty. Like nothing he'd ever known.

He had told Carol he was going spearing.

"It's so nice," Binnie said.

His hand moved from her arm to slide around her waist, gently pulling her to him. Her hip came against his. She glanced up at him, smiling. The moonlight paled her face and he saw her red lips, partly open. He had to look away. Her eyes were shining with the moonlight in them.

She spoke very seldom.

We could. . . ." he let it trail off.

She looked at him and smiled. There was something catlike about her walk, the way her body moved under the thin blue dress. The softness of her.

He wanted to yell.

"It's so nice, isn't it, really?" Binnie said.

He cleared his throat, leaned over and kissed her cheek. She wriggled a little, looked at him and smiled. Then she turned in his arms and stretched up on tip-toe. Her lips were parted, her eyes closed, the corners of her lips turned up in that sly smile.

Secret. Just between the two of them.

He held her as tight as he could and kissed her. He seemed

to sink right through her into the ground. He wanted to crush her, his hands on her back, then snarled in her soft black hair.

They separated, panting a little. Her eyes were on him and the music flared, drifting down toward the lake, echoing back from the far shore.

He wanted to talk. Only there was nothing to say. It seemed as if they had known each other for a long while, yet with all the bright newness there. There was no need for talk.

They came along the edge of the lake, on the grass just above the shore where the mangroves had been cut away. A mullet jumped out there in the darkness. It made quite a splash.

A girl ran out of the woods over there, running toward the pavilion. Her legs flashed white in the dying light. A tall boy crashed after her, laughing.

Binnie looked at him and they smiled, knowingly.

They reached the bench he'd been heading for. It was in a copse of cabbage palms on freshly mowed grass, facing the lake, shielded entirely from the pavilion and the lights. The music reached them faintly.

He was very excited. They moved close together.

She leaned back, making a long plane of her body and the moonlight washed over her. She glanced at him from the corners of her eyes, her hand sought his and squeezed. She was holding a handkerchief in the hand. His heart rocked so hard it hurt.

"Binnie," he said. "Binnie."

"Allen," she said.

Their mouths came together and he held her close, kissing her, experiencing something new and terrible and it was something that made him want to absolutely break her, mash her. Her lips moved against his and he heard the sound in her throat. He tried to bring her over against him and she said, "Uh-uh!" still kissing him. She shook her head, still kissing him, holding herself from coming against him. He stopped the kiss.

"How long will you be down here?" he asked.

She smiled, looking out over the lake.

"Binnie," he said. "I've got to see you."

"You're seeing me, silly!"

"You know what I mean."

"But you *are* seeing me."

"Again," he said. "Again, Binnie. When can I see you—again?"

"Why, I don't know, Allen." She looked at him from the cor-

ners of her eyes and smiled. He grabbed her, kissing her mouth, her forehead, her cheeks, her throat. He held her hands against his face.

"Binnie," he said. "I love you."

She drew her head away, smiling at him, her eyes shining.

"Oh, Allen," she said, closing her eyes, moving her lips. And after that kiss, she said, "You can see me again—if you like."

He remembered Carol. But there was no feeling about Carol now. None at all. Just an animosity, kind of.

"You through school yet?" he asked.

"Last year, high."

"Me, too. Can't you stay down here—go to school here, this fall? Don't you reckon you could stay with your aunt, like now? Instead of going back North?"

"Oh, you!" she said.

"Binnie, answer me."

She shrugged. "Well, maybe."

HE CAME through the woods toward home. Walking. He didn't have a car, but somehow he'd have to get one. Her aunt had come to the pavilion for her in a big Lincoln.

Binnie was in his system, running through his veins, like acid.

Eating at him with a sweet burning.

After she'd gone away with her aunt, he had jogged along the dirt road toward Spanishtown. It was eight miles from where he lived, six miles in the wrong direction from home. He found the address she had given him and stood across the street by a night-blooming jasmine bush, in the midst of choking scent, and stared at the house.

Huge and very old it was, dating back to the Civil War.

A light was lit in an upstairs bedroom and he saw her in the room. She was slipping out of her dress. He was in an agony of loving her, standing there. Then she moved to the window, pulled the shade and pretty soon the light went out. For a time he stood there staring at the dark shadow of the window, behind which he knew she moved and breathed. Finally, he turned toward home.

Carol and he had long planned marriage. It had been like that. In a manner of speaking, they were already married. For the three years since they had come together, they'd been inseparable. They knew everything there was to know about each other.

Now—like *that*—it was gone. He had no more feeling for Carol

than for a chunk of wood from the woodpile. Less. Wood was useful.

He had to tell her. He didn't care what happened.

He loved Binnie. She loved him, he knew it. The way she acted; the quiet, sweet way.

Funny, how you found something like this. He had lied to Carol, said he was going spearing with Al Hewitt. He had really wanted to go alone over to the dance pavilion outside Georgetown. He had. He danced twice with Binnie, who had come alone—and then the rest.

From the moment he first held her, dancing, he had known. From the way she acted. The little things she said. Her smile. Her movements.

Right now, crossing the pine woods behind his home, he burned for her. He wanted to turn and run back there; wake her up, tell her over and over again.

He was almost ill with the way he felt. He crossed the yard toward the cabin.

"Allen."

It was Carol. She'd been standing by the front gallery and now she walked along the side of the cabin.

He stopped and looked at her. She came up to him.

"Allen, where have you been?"

"No place." He yawned.

"I've been waiting for hours."

"Why?"

"I wanted to see you." She moved up close to him, lifting her arms and for an instant she was familiarly against him. It was nothing. He didn't want to be near her. He tugged her arms down and stepped back.

She looked at him, frowning, the moonlight very bright on her pale hair, her eyes very wide.

"Allen," she said. "Let's go someplace."

"Carol. We're through," he told her. "Finished. I'm sorry, I reckon—but that's the way it is. I don't want to hurt you. It wouldn't be fair, making believe."

"What?"

He nodded. "Through," he said. "Done with."

"I don't understand."

She was wearing a light-colored dress, her pale blonde hair drawn around her head and tied with a ribbon behind. She was very pretty.

"Look," he said. "Forget you ever knew me. I won't be seeing you again. Good night." He turned and started toward the back door.

"Allen!" She ran at him, grasped his arm. Her face was stricken. "What d'you mean?"

He pried her fingers loose, released her hands. He shook his head. She irritated him. Damn it, couldn't she understand? He didn't want to tell her he was tired of her. What did he have to do, draw her a picture?

"We're through. I don't want to see you again."

"There's somebody else—another girl?"

"No." He wouldn't hurt her, not that way. "Nothing. Just through. I'm not good enough for you. I've thought it all out carefully. I reckon we'll get over it."

She stood there shaking her head, staring at him. There was a kind of wild disbelief, and belief and fright, all mingled together on her face. She kept shaking her head, bending a little toward him from the waist.

"I'm just not good enough," he said. "Thought it all out."

She turned and ran. She ran along the side of the cabin, and he knew she was crying. She ran out onto the dirt road and down the road toward her home.

He stood there a moment, listening to the sound of her feet striking the ground. Then he

went inside. He closed the door and sighed.

He drank a glass of milk in the dark, so the light wouldn't wake his mother and father. He ate a cold bacon sandwich. Then he went to bed.

For hours he lay there, thinking about Binnie. He couldn't bring her face to his mind's eye—and when he thought he'd succeeded . . . it was Carol's face, instead.

THE next few days were very bad. Carol came around and started pleading with him. His mother probably guessed what was up, but asked anyway.

He told his mother, "She won't leave me alone. What do I have to do, draw her a picture?"

His mother just looked at him. She started to say something once, thought better of it and let him alone.

His father worked at the mill in Georgetown. If he noticed anything, he kept it to himself.

Carol lurked near him wherever he went. He couldn't seem to escape her. He'd taken a part-time job at the corners, for the summer, tying meal sacks for old Hatchby, at seventy-five cents an hour. Carol kept coming into the

warehouse from the back entrance by the river, running up to him, dressed in tight jeans, crying.

"I'll do anything!" she said. "Only take me back, Allen. Don't leave me like this."

He would remember her grieving eyes, the abandoned pride.

He had to walk out on the job.

She sneaked into his room one night. "I know what it is," she whispered. "I haven't been good enough to you."

By now, he had acquired a certain brutality toward her. He thought of Binnie incessantly. An obsessive dream. Carol was like a piece of furniture that stood in his way.

That was the trouble. He couldn't shove her out of his way, and it began to trouble him.

She grabbed him, kissing him.

He pushed her away.

"Will you leave me be?"

"Allen. . . ."

"It's for your own good."

"No, no. How can you forget all the things—?"

He wanted to sock her. He didn't. He couldn't do that, either. She would leave him, crying. But she would always come back.

Twice he went to Spanishtown.

Once he found Binnie home. She was alone in the house. He went inside with her. She spoke so very seldom, just smiled slyly at him. Many times he'd said:

"Binnie, I love you."

She would smile at him, her eyes shining, her body taut.

"What do you do all day? When can I see you?"

"You're seeing me."

He was nearly out of his mind. She would not say that she loved him. Just that sly smile.

Going home, he reeled. When he reached home, Carol was waiting. It developed into the worst scene yet. He didn't know what to do. He wanted to think about Binnie.

"Allen—you love me," insisted Carol. "You know you do."

She wouldn't go home for a long time. When she finally did, it was the usual way—crying. The next day, she was back again. Hanging around, pleading.

Something began to happen inside Allen. . . .

Two weeks went by. Whenever he tried to see Binnie, there was nobody home. She was out with her aunt, she told him later. But they were together a few times, and it was wonderful. He was in a crazy dream state now.

Then, one evening he knew Carol was following him.

He cut off through the woods and stopped.

She came up to him, surprised. "It's another girl!"

"No, Carol."

"Yes."

"Don't ever follow me like this again," he said. He churned inside over it. He never wanted them to meet. He didn't want Carol to know about Binnie.

Carol's face was very pale. "If there is," she said. "I'll kill her."

"Go back."

"I won't go back."

But he finally persuaded her, tying his feelings up inside him. He had to sneak over to Binnie's now, watching that Carol never saw him go.

He became frenzied, thinking she would follow him.

He tried every way possible to get rid of Carol.

But she trailed him. She lurked. He didn't know what to do. Everywhere he turned, Carol—pleading—watching—waiting.

One night, lying in his bed, he knew what he had to do. It was the only way.

He had to kill her.

Then he would have Binnie all to himself. The way it was supposed to be. He couldn't stand

it, the way Carol was acting. Not any more.

He tried to think of ways to kill. It had to be some way, so he wouldn't get caught.

Finally, he hit on the way. He rose in the night, trimmed a bamboo pole, rigged it with a cord loop. The next day, mid-morning, he went out in the palmetto fields to hunt down a coral snake.

By now the surface of his mind was black with a white dot in the middle. The white dot was what he was doing. He moved in a kind of concentrated and contained anger, with the sweet saturation of Binnie all through him.

He found the snake, finally—small, fat, violent-hued, and deadly—in some dry grass by a slash pine. Even though he'd been born in this country of snakes, he was careful. A coral was the deadliest of snakes. One touch, the skin punctured, was enough. But he had caught snakes before, and the fear was stilled by the promise. He snagged the snake with the loop, carried it to the woodshed and boxed it.

All he could think of now was the pale taut smoothness of Binnie, the way she smiled, her shining eyes, and what she could do in that sly way of hers.

Carol was no longer a person to him. Killing her was not really killing her in the sense that it was wrong—murder, anything like that. She was a talking, walking *something* that stood in his way. Like walking into a tree every time you turned around. . . . And she *might* discover Binnie.

The next morning when Carol found him in the woodshed, he was ready.

"All right," he said.

She clung to him, sobbing.

"I thought I'd be able to hold out," he said. "Reckon I can't, honey. Been trying to kid myself."

"Allen."

"Listen," he said. "Tomorrow—tomorrow we'll take a lunch, go over by the Oklawatchi, where we used to go. All right? We'll spend the whole day.' He held her very close, thinking of Binnie. "We'll take a blanket, like before—just lay around all day. Talk it all out."

She was a wreck. She didn't want to leave him. She was afraid he would change his mind again. She'd told her mother how they would be married someday. Everything was established in her mind. He was her man. That was all there was to it.

"Sure. It was for your own good, Carol. I didn't reckon I

was good enough for you. I don't care any more."

"Oh, yes—just us."

He held her close, staring over her shoulder at the side of the woodshed, blind and bitter.

"Let's go now," she said. "It's not even noon, yet. I could never wait, Allen."

"All right."

She ran home to fix a lunch. He found some thick cowhide and sewed a small sack, arranging a leather drawstring so it would close tightly.

The coral snake was very lively in the leather sack. He got his leather jacket and put the sack in the pocket, carrying the jacket.

He writhed a little every time he thought of Binnie.

IT WAS four miles and they walked it, with Carol pulling at him, wanting to stop all along the way. He couldn't let that happen. He had chosen the spot, not because it was their old favorite place to spend a day, but because it was so far away and nobody would be around.

He carried the blanket over his shoulder, the leather jacket over one arm. She asked him about the jacket.

"Thinking of you, I reckon," he

told her. "Chance it might rain, like that other time we were out there. You could wear the jacket."

They didn't talk much. She tried, but he couldn't bring himself to say much. He knew what he had to do. So what use was there wasting time talking?

He kept thinking of Binnie, remembering everything about her and he was deeply pleased at being able to bring her image to his mind's eye now. Sometimes it was still Carol, though.

Carol didn't bother him a bit. He had a job to do. He would do it—as quickly as possible, because it might take a little time. And he wanted to see Binnie tonight.

He'd told Binnie he would come to her home at eight.

Carol looked fine, but there was this desperate look in her eyes. She was wearing tight blue jeans and a white shirt, her thick blonde hair rich with sunshine.

An hour later, he sat there on the blanket with her, held her down and showed her the snake.

He held the snake just behind the bullet head, its head sticking out of the leather sack.

She screamed as he pushed it at her.

"It's for you, Carol. I couldn't stand it."

"Allen—it's a coral!"

"Yes," he said simply. He had a terrible time trying to hold her down. She screamed and her head thrashed around. The snake bit her throat.

"There," he said.

He shook the snake out of the sack. It crawled away, slithering through the folds of the rumpled blanket and off into the dry grass above the riverbank.

Carol sprang up and ran.

The sun beat down in a vicious slant. That'll hasten it, he thought. The heat, the running, the fear and action.

She came running back and sprawled on her knees beside him on the blanket. Her face was very red.

"Allen," she cried. "You've killed me!"

He wanted to tell her why he'd done this. But he couldn't. He decided he should make it as easy for her as possible. He owed her that much.

"Carol," he said. "It's something I had to do. Told you I wasn't good enough for you. You wouldn't listen."

She just lay there, with the sun beating down on her. He knew she wouldn't move any more now.

She was staring up at him, trying to talk.

Something touched him inside, lightly, just once.

He ignored it.

"I'm sorry—I reckon, I am," he said. "Good-by, Carol. Honey."

He saw the way her eyes strained at him. Her fingers hooked and clutched at the dry grass. He did not like looking at her.

He turned away, went over and picked up his jacket, brushed it, found the leather sack and started toward home.

HE SPOKE to Sheriff Corle. The sheriff was parked in his gray tudor sedan in front of the River Bar and Grille, in Georgetown. Allen had been lucky. He had figured he'd have to go to the sheriff's office in Spanishtown.

"Yes sir," he said. "She acted funny, like."

Corle watched him. Corle was sitting in the car. He opened the door and got out and stood there, watching him. Corle was a long, raw-boned man, wearing a dust-covered white Stetson. He was chewing tobacco. He spat beyond the fender of the car, took the chew out and flipped it away. He wiped his hand on his trousers,

straightened his hat down over his eyes.

"She just ran off, you say?"

Allen nodded. "We were eating lunch, see? Don't know what got into her. 'I'll be back in a minute,' she says. She gets up an' walks off into the woods."

"Oh, well—that," the sheriff said. He grinned. "Don't you reckon—?"

Allen shook his head. "She didn't come back."

"Now, that," the sheriff said. "I reckon—"

"I looked all over for her. Can't figure it."

"She wasn't riled?"

"No."

"Did you see if she went home?"

"No. I came straight over this way."

"I reckon it's nothing to stew over," the sheriff said.

"I thought I'd better tell you."

"Fine."

"Well, then—I reckon."

The sheriff nodded. "I'll just check with her folks. I'm going down that way. Want to come along?"

He shook his head. "I'll keep looking. I'm worried."

The sheriff frowned. He turned and got into his car and drove off. The sun was gone now and

already the dust seemed to lay heavy.

Allen started jogging down the road toward Spanishtown. He couldn't seem to get his breath. He couldn't get to Binnie fast enough. He was free. There was only Binnie and himself. . . .

She was beautiful. Her dress was new, a bright canary yellow and it clung to her willowy body. She came out onto the porch and closed the door. He held her close in the darkness, his face buried in her scented hair.

"Oh, Allen," she said.

They kissed. He was still damp with perspiration from the hurried way he had come to her. He drowned in a kind of delight, being with her. When she pulled her lips from his, he asked:

"Anybody home?"

She shook her head and smiled slyly at him.

"Let's sit over here," she said. She moved over to the porch swing.

They sat on the swing, there on the front gallery of the old house and the thick, powerful flowing scent of night-blooming jasmine seemed to form clouds around them.

They kissed again. Her lips were so tender, her body so taut.

"Let's go inside," he said.

The saffron glow from a street-light down the block shone on her hair as she turned and smiled at him. She took his hand and bounced it on her leg. She raised her head and looked past him up the dark street.

"Let's go inside," he said again. He grabbed her and they kissed and the swing creaked.

"Oh, you," she said.

"Binnie," he said. He kissed her hands. She watched him, smiling.

"Couldn't wait to see you," he said.

Her eyes shone. She glanced out over the gallery railing.

"Let's go inside, Binnie."

"Wait."

A car came down the street. It was a Ford convertible with the top down. It turned in the driveway and stopped. A man was sitting behind the wheel.

She smiled at Allen, released her hand and stood up. She smiled at him again, then walked to the gallery steps.

"Just a minute, Charley," she called.

Allen rose from the swing and stood there looking at her. His mouth moved but no words came out.

She glanced at the car, then

at the door of the house. She snapped her fingers. She didn't seem to know Allen was there at all. He took a step toward her.

"Binnie," he whispered.

The car out there creaked, and the man coughed. A light wind blew among the trees, trailing in the tops, touching the Spanish moss.

She snapped her fingers again and ran inside the house. Her perfume swirled about him.

Allen stood there. He couldn't think. A horrible feeling of growing, deep embarrassment came to life inside him. He didn't know what to do.

The man out there in the car lit a cigarette.

Binnie came out onto the gallery again, slammed the door. She held a light coat in one hand.

Allen tried to say something.

She looked at him and smiled slyly. "I'm going back North tomorrow," she said.

"Binnie!" He choked with it, reaching toward her.

"I've got a date," she said.

She smiled again, turned and ran off the gallery and out to the car.

"Hell," the man said, "you took long enough."

A cigarette spun out across the lawn, showering redly.

The car door slammed. Standing there on the gallery, Allen heard her laughter. The car backed swiftly out of the drive, and hissed away down the street. More laughter trickled back. Binnie's—and the man's.

Allen stood there. He was very ill. He looked at the windows of the house. A light was lit inside. He remembered the afternoon he had spent in there with her.

He stumbled off the steps and walked out into the middle of the street. He took the road toward home, walking slowly. He was blind to everything. Binnie's sweet perfume still clung to his jacket.

He was so numb he couldn't think.

Smiling, that way. . . .

"Carol," he said. "Carol!"

He started to run. . . .

The sheriff and a deputy picked him up just outside of Georgetown on the Spanishtown road. The car came to a fast, dusty stop.

"That's him."

"Hurry up," the sheriff said.

"Get in the car."

"Wait'll I frisk him, Chris."

Allen stood there, trying to remember beyond the smile, the eyes and the jasmine.

"Here it is," the deputy said. "Right in his pocket."

Allen stared at the leather sack. Then he looked at the sheriff and climbed into the car. He uttered a startled cry.

Carol sat there, moaning.

She seemed to shrink away from him, lying over against the far window.

The deputy crowded in beside him.

Allen began to scream inside. He looked at Carol. The car started with a lurch.

"You can talk, mister," the dep-

uty said. "She can't hear you. She's sick."

He didn't say anything.

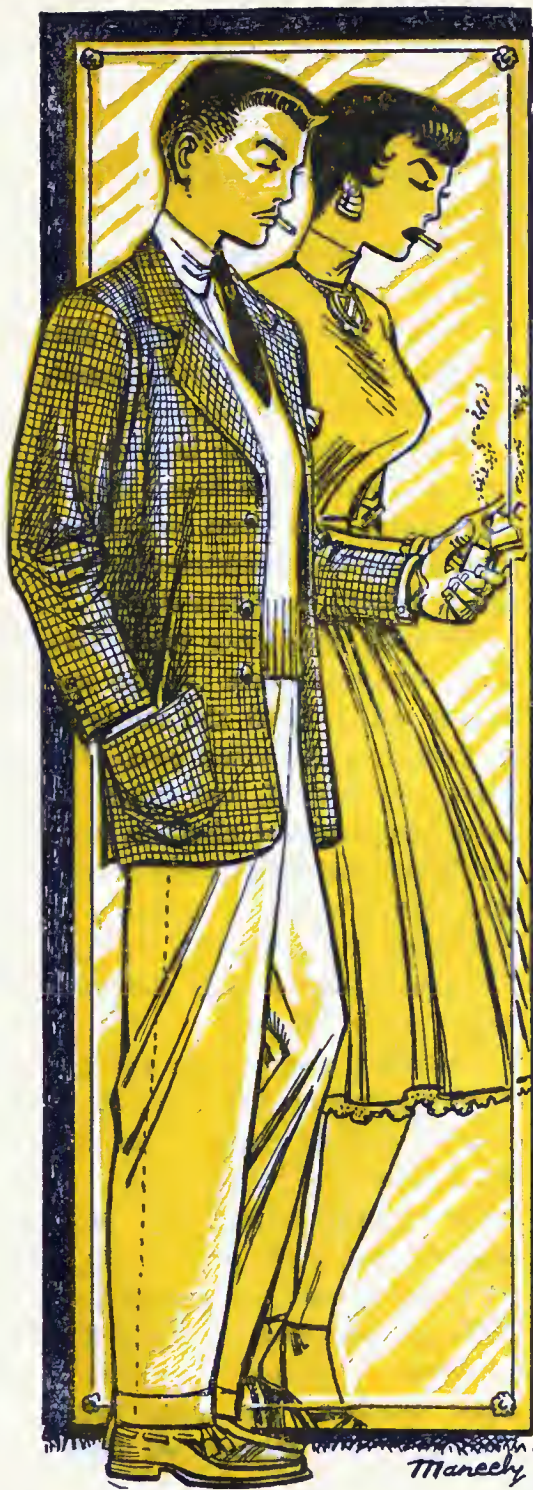
"But she could talk a little while ago," the sheriff said. "We'll get her to the hospital. They'll fix her."

"She'll pull through," the deputy said.

"It was the sack," the sheriff said. "Snake must of bit most of the poison out of him on that leather sack."

"Will she live?" Allen asked.

"You better hope she will," the sheriff said.



DOUBLE OR NOTHING

THE LADY IMPERSONATOR
LIKED HIS ROLE TOO WELL.

by JOHN BENDER

I CALLED Trapinger from the pay phone in a little restaurant outside of Surf City and told him I would be in town in half an hour or so.

"You're all set?" he asked.

"Looking for action," I said. "You name it."

"Fine," he said. "Fine. Your rooms will be waiting at the Miramar Hotel." I'd never met him, and he sounded oily, careful as a church elder. I didn't mind—most of them were like that, I'd found. Too fastidious to do their own dirty work, or afraid to do it. Either way, it created a need, and Jody and I were able to fill it.

I hung up and went outside, back to the car. One of the counter-men was out there, leaning comfortably on our top-down convertible, all soft talk and flash-

Maneely

ing white teeth. He looked like one of the pretty ones that had flunked the grade in Hollywood—shoulders like a halfback, hips like a girl's, and the inevitable shiny black hair curling long on his neck. He straightened up quickly when I got in behind the wheel.

Even with the top down, the smell of Jody's perfume was thick in the warm, still air. Glancing over, I saw too much sheer nylon above the knee; it was hot, but not hot enough for the dress to be pulled that high.

"You ready?" I asked shortly. "Or am I breaking up something?"

The heavily-painted lips smiled lazily, the laugh was low and teasing, as much for my benefit as the doll-boy's. "We were just chatting. Anytime you're ready, Jeff." With the delicately waved good-by, a fresh blast of perfume boiled about us.

"See you again," the counter-man said. He couldn't help leering at Jody. The jerk.

I put the car in gear and shot out onto the highway, not angry but not amused, either. "Cute," I said. "Real cute."

Jody laughed. "I thought so, too."

"I thought we got it all

straightened out the last time, back in Vegas."

"Just practicing, Jeff. A gal must keep her hand in, you know."

"It's a stupid chance to take," I said. "One of these days it won't be funny. If I hadn't caught that Denver daddy with a lucky punch, we'd still be explaining—"

"Relax, relax. The kid wanted to talk, sharpen his line a little." The laugh was deep, masculine and, as always, disconcerting. "So did I. What's the harm done?"

We rode in silence for a way, Jody hunched down on the seat beside me. I head the rustle of movement and looked over. The black wig was off, and there was something comical about it now, all right, with his own short hair, crew cut like mine, sticking up from that heavily made-up face.

"Damn wig is hot," he said. "How much longer?"

I stopped and put up the top. "Twenty, twenty-five minutes or so and we'll be there. Keep that wig handy, kid, just in case."

He grunted something, probably obscene, and I grinned down the road. He was the youngest, by eight minutes, and it rubbed him whenever I played the role of older brother. We were twins, identical ones, though we didn't

go around advertising it, of course. Earlier, when we'd been growing up, it had come in handy. In school, on dates—the usual kind of fun twins have fooling their teachers or friends; even parents, sometimes. We always could, you see. Nobody had ever been able to tell us apart. Now, it was a little different. We still fooled people. But now Jody frequently dressed as a woman, and as far as anyone was concerned—even the people I did business for—Jody was my younger sister. There was the resemblance that we took care wasn't too close—I had the mustache and the close-cropped hair and the padded shoulders in my suits, and Jody was just a good-looking brunette dish.

All in all, it was a cosy, fool-proof setup, but I didn't like Jody getting too cute about it, the way he had there at the diner with that counterman. Back in Vegas, on the last job, Jody had let himself be latched onto by a tourist whose wife didn't understand him as well as I did. It got pretty sticky and I had to belt the guy out so he wouldn't foul up the tight schedule we were working on.

I just hoped I wasn't going to have any trouble with Jody on

this job. A sense of humor is a good thing, but not in our line of work. No, you have to play it careful all the way—when your business is murder.

"Ah, Miss Trent . . . Mr. Trent!" The hotel manager bowed us from the register to the elevator bank. "We have your rooms all ready. Anything you want, please let me know."

He was a small, dark guy, with a trace of accent that suggested he was trying not to speak his native French. Very smooth, very self-effacing, but with a hint of the superior underneath it all. He looked Jody over like a connoisseur.

"I hope that you will be very comfortable, Miss Trent," he added, his manner suggesting, naturally, that if he were coaxed, he was the fellow who could arrange things to her complete delight.

Jody threw him the bait as we waited for the elevator. The fluttering, long lashes, the suggestive smile. Once I'd worried about focusing this much attention on Jody, thinking some sharp character might penetrate the disguise, but now my concern was only that Jody didn't sweet-talk some guy into being a nuisance.

"I'll call you if I need any-

thing," Jody said in that throaty, come-onna-my-house voice I wished he wouldn't use.

I stepped between them. "Thank you, Mr. Duvert. My sister will be fine. Although she hasn't been feeling too well on this tour. I just want her to get all the rest she can."

"Of course, sir."

"You have a doctor here, I take it. I may want him to look in on her." It was a silly question—at this sort of swank layout they probably had a built-in hospital.

"We have a house physician and staff, yes," he said. "I trust Miss Trent will not require his services."

"I hope not," Jody said. "I'm feeling better already." He smiled and squeezed Duvert's hand.

I frowned, wishing that damn elevator would come. Duvert didn't frown; he looked ready to take off like a Roman candle.

On the way up I growled softly to Jody, "Lay off. Cut the comedy."

"We mustn't be too obvious about it, brother, dear." He came into my room with me and looked around quickly, professionally. "I take it we're working the sick-headache routine? But we don't have to lay it on with a trowel."

"Just let me write the script, kid."

"Sure," Jody said. But I didn't like the way he said it or the wink he gave me as he went across the hall.

TRAPINGER called me around nine. We were in the bar, Jody and me, having a nightcap after a comfortable dinner. Well, the food was good, but Jody was throwing the body around too much for my comfort, and I got worked up about it. I realized I was going off the handle a little too easily; nerves, probably. It seemed that with each new job the jumps started earlier. And I wasn't getting the kick out of it that I used to. Once it had been a sort of growing exhilaration, the kind you get anticipating good brandy, good music or a good-looking woman.

Jody didn't have any problems at all, unless it was holding the guys at arm's length. We had more, "Haven't we met somewhere before?" routines thrown at us than you can count on all fingers. Jody ate it up. There was still enough of the ham in him to enjoy the part he was playing.

The waiter brought me the phone, just around nine, and it

was Trapinger's voice. "I'm in the outer lobby," he said. "Why don't you go out to your car and take a little spin?"

"Good idea," I said. "It's getting close in here."

Jody cocked one thin eyebrow in a gesture so patly feminine it startled me. "Business call?"

"Check," I said, to him and the waiter. "Care for a little ride down along the shore?"

"A wonderful idea, dear. Maybe it will blow this headache away."

"I hope Madame feels better," the waiter offered solicitously with our change. Jody and I smiled at each other. It always was good to have a plant picked up so easily.

Trapinger waited until we were well away from the parking lot before he sat up straight on the back seat. A tall, angular man, he had the face of a dishonest cashier who is only waiting for the boss to turn his back. I introduced my sister, and let it go at that. Trapinger wasn't in on the methods I used; nobody was, except Jody. In the rear view mirror I could see Trapinger eyeing Jody very carefully, and I made a note to make this their first and last meeting.

"Any time you feel like talking," I said.

He tore his eyes away and got to the business at hand. It was a routine blast. A character named Phil McReady who'd bucked the syndicate successfully for a couple of months. Trapinger didn't exactly press me with information, but I could read enough between his grunted statements. If I guessed correctly, the syndicate was trying to give McReady the dirty end of the stick, and he wasn't taking. The old dodge—they wanted to lay off a lemon list on him and break him into so many small pieces he'd have to beg his carfare back from the track. But McReady insisted on keeping his independent bookie status that was milking too much cream away from the big boys.

"You know my terms," I told Trapinger. "Half in cash now, half on delivery."

He handed me an envelope, and I gave it to Jody to count.

"Fifteen hundred," Jody said. "Check. Is this Mr. McReady?" I could see the identification photo Jody held down to the dash lights. "Isn't it a shame? Such a nice-looking man."

Trapinger chuckled. "Sensa humor, this kid got." He laughed a bit more. "McReady lives out on Stevens. Forty-two. He's got an

office downtown, the Bristow Building."

"I'll find him," I said. "Don't worry."

"When you gonna— I mean, you figured out when and where?"

"I wouldn't tell you if I had." I swung the car around, back toward the hotel. "It's got to be my show—and one I don't sell tickets to. Just read your local papers."

I had no intention of making it a daytime job, though I'd done some of those, too. Working at night cut down a lot of chances, and I wanted it as safe as possible. I dropped Trapinger at a corner where he could grab a cab, and drove Jody back to the hotel. I had a city map. I checked it, and the picture of McReady, in my room.

"Nine-forty," I told Jody. "If I don't call you in thirty minutes, I'm working."

Jody nodded.

"You call the house physician soon as you get to your room. Remember, keep it simple. Your sinus is acting up. Show him the prescription you got in Chicago and ask him to reorder it."

"Right, right," Jody said, impatiently. "I've only done this bit half a dozen times. Relax,

brother." He lit a cigarette. "How about the suitcase?"

"That one, there by the bed. Take it with you."

It held a change of clothes for him—gray tweed suit, white shirt, green socks, black shoes—identical to the ones I was wearing. There was also a make-up kit with the mustache and the darker skin base. After the doctor left Miss Trent snug in her room, Mr. Trent—which would also be Jody—would go down and circulate freely in the bar, continuing the bourbon and soda nightcaps I had been having before. He would explain to the waiter that Miss Trent's headache had got worse and that she wanted to rest in her room.

It was the simplest, most unbreakable alibi I could ever ask for. For the time I would be busy taking care of McReady—Jody would be me.

I went out the window to the fire-escape.

"Good hunting," Jody said. "Bring home the bacon."

I grinned. "It beats summer stock, don't it, kid?"

That's what we'd been doing, a few years back. Summer stock; barning around the country in a bad play called, "Tea for Two." Like Jody and me, the play wasn't

Double or Nothing

quite good enough to make the boards on Broadway, but it was a show which required twins, and you don't find many of those plays. As a matter of fact, when it closed, we didn't find another. We went onto a song and dance routine, but it was a hungry existence; finally we started working singles, nightclubs, roadhouses and such. Julie Gross, our agent back in New York, managed to get us booked, overnights or fill-ins, every couple of weeks or so; and it was on one of those backwood engagements that we fell into this.

I got tangled up one night with a rough character in a jook joint down south on the grapefruit circuit. We were both pretty tanked up, I guess. He stomped me to a fare-thee-well, so when I ran into him later, I used a knife. Jody was doing a reading for the local little theater society that night. Nobody realized there were two of us in town, and when the cops picked up Jody on the description, his alibi was solid iron. It started us thinking. . . .

Now, I was thinking about the future, not the past. I could feel the excitement beginning to grow inside, like it does when you have the opening spot in front of a strange audience. You want to

give it all you've got, make 'em sit up, make 'em like it. I was almost at Stevens Street, according to the city map I'd memorized. Another left and I was there, checking the numbers—they ran down to 42—checking the time. Five to ten.

It was a corner house, back from the street, set off by itself. There was no one on the street when I walked through the dark, high-hedged entrance. I went right up to the front door, rang the bell once, and waited.

This was another part of it I liked. The long, heady moments of anticipation that hung between the ringing of the bell and the appearance of the—audience. My toughest critic, I thought, here he comes now. The footsteps stopped, the door opened, and, luck of luck, there he was. McReady. Once, on a job in Cincinnati, I'd drawn the guy's girl-friend, and she'd suspected somehow, instinctively, I guess. Anyway, she'd screamed—and her boy had gone for a gun. It was pretty messy. Ordinarily I don't mind how many people see me, just so long as there is no reason for them to be suspicious or study me. That time, after I got *him*, she earned herself a free ride to the morgue, too. I didn't like to

do it but I couldn't take the chance; that babe's instinct was too sharp.

"Yes?" McReady said.

"Mr. McReady?" I asked; and when he nodded: "I've been sent here by the Surf City Star. They want me to ask you—"

It was just talk, cover-up. His eyes followed my left hand as I reached, the way a reporter might, for some paper in my inside jacket pocket; he didn't notice the knife in my right hand which I'd slipped down from my sleeve. Maybe he saw the knife at the last moment. His eyes bugged in his head. The cry he started never got past his throat. . . .

GETTING rid of the knife took only a few extra minutes. It was a cheap, dime-store affair that probably never could be traced, but I walked the few blocks down to the shore and dropped the clean-wiped knife from one of the palisades that overlooked the water. Just in case. Heading back to the hotel, I thought about calling Trapinger to tell him to watch the morning papers, and about setting up a date to collect the rest of the fee.

I used the same route I had left by, heading round in back

through the alley to the fire-escapes. I was swinging up when the lights caught me.

"There he is! Over here, Joel!"

The night exploded in the blasts of police whistles. Because I couldn't really believe that it was happening to me, I stood rooted to the spot.

A big burly guy, gun in hand, came up fast to grab me.

"Hold it, buster," he told me. "Just put your hands on your head and hold it."

"What's going on here?" I demanded.

Another pair of hands frisked me. "He's clean, Jim. Let's get him inside." The alley was swarming with people now, mostly cops. Nobody seemed to pay any attention to my protests. They shoved me along, through a side door into a narrow corridor that led eventually to a small office near the bar. It was Duvert's office.

The little hotel manager was nervously pacing the carpet in front of his desk. There was a policeman here too, and a bald, white-faced guy sitting in a chair, mopping his forehead.

Duvert looked at me strangely, then at the detectives who had brought me in. He nodded.

The bald guy in the chair

looked up. His face tightened when he saw me. "That's him! That's the one! I'd know him anywhere!"

"Look," I said, "what is this?"

The detective growled, "Are you kidding, Trent?" He looked down at the man in the chair. "You'll have to come with us, too," he said, "to sign the—"

"Look," I said again. "Will somebody please tell me—"

"Cut it out, Trent," the detective said. "Don't make it any tougher on yourself than you have to."

A uniformed policeman came in, and the detectives saluted him. "All cleaned up, Cap," said the one next to me. "Here's your boy."

The captain nodded. "I saw the body in the bar. What happened?"

"An argument. Trent here let him have it with a bottle. When he saw he'd killed him, he ran. We thought he'd ducked into the parking lot, but he was around in back, trying to climb back up into the hotel."

"Who's this?" the captain indicated the bald man.

"Friend of the guy that got bumped."

"Harold Jefferson." The man in the chair cleared his throat.

"We were just standing in the bar, having a few drinks, George and me, and this fellow. He seemed friendly enough, but he wasn't acting right. Not tight, but, well, the way he handled himself, almost like a woman. A couple of times when he laughed he kind of winked at us. I told George to leave him alone, but George just laughed. 'Well, we got a real gay one here,' George said. I guess he made a couple of cracks. George was quite a kidder. First thing I knew, they were arguing and swinging punches. Then this one grabbed up George's beer bottle. . . ."

I didn't listen to all he said. Jody, I was thinking, Jody, you damn fool! Only I was the bigger fool, for not having noticed that Jody had let his feminine role become too real a part of himself. . . .

So my alibi was shot. But good and shot. And this rap wasn't one I could waltz away from. Even for second degree in this state they threw away the key.

But there was a chance, still. A slim chance. Though they'd nabbed me, Jody got away. Through the parking lot. It might be enough. I wasn't sure exactly what the legalities would be, but I was sure of this: if these

cops, or any cops, for that matter, came up against two men, identical in every respect, they couldn't pick one as a criminal—and not the other. And all the eye-witnesses in the world couldn't pick one identical twin from the other. No Grand Jury would indict, even for spitting on the sidewalk, if the defense could produce such an identical person that it left a reasonable doubt.

So I went downtown with the cops, certain that Jody, as Miss Trent, would turn up sooner or later to see me. The more I thought about it, the better it looked. There was nothing the police could do to me—or us—as long as we didn't confess to anything.

It was all in the morning pa-

pers—McReady, knocked off by an unknown knifer; the guy in the Miramar Bar, George Evans, killed in a brawl.

But it was another item, buried in the back of the paper that brought me, trembling, from the cell cot:

Police report the accidental death of an unknown man last night in the Hotel Miramar's parking lot on Shorefront Road. Police theorize that the man might have been engaged in looting the parked vehicles and had hidden behind a car to escape detection. Unknown to the victim, police state, the car he chose to hide behind was occupied, and when it backed out suddenly it passed over his body.

The young couple who were in the car reported the accident to the police. They were not held, nor was their identity made known. The dead man was about 35, and wore a gray tweed suit, white shirt, green socks and black shoes, but positive identification was impossible.



THE RAT GAME

by PHILIP WECK

The carnival barker spent his wedding night with a knife in his back—put there by his brother or his best friend, or his wife.

I THOUGHT it was a mountain with snow on its top, shimmering and swimming in the summer's heat. But gradually, slowly, it steadied. And it was no snow; it

was a thick, heavy thatch of white hair, unruly and standing almost straight up. Under it was a heavy, red face. A cop.

A cop, and behind him another cop was sitting in a chair watching me. Behind that was a third man, standing. I was in a high bed, with a white ceiling over me, white sheets covering the bed—and a white fire burning in the middle of my back.

"All right, son," the cop said. "All right now. Take it easy. Can you hear me?"

Of course I could hear him and I tried to say, "Yes." But he leaned forward and he asked again, "Can you hear me?" and I knew my lips hadn't moved and my voice had made no sound.

I moved my hand just a bit.

"Who stabbed you, son?" he asked.

Who stabbed me? I remembered then—some of it. I remembered the party. Four of us there drinking and laughing and having a good time. My wife. My brother. My friend. Me.

Yeah, who stabbed me?

I tried to sit up. The white heat in my back became a sheet of fire burning up and down my spine, and the perspiration broke out on my face. I sank back again

while the white hair wavered and shimmered.

Then a dry, hollow voice crackled through the whiteness. "That'll be enough, gentlemen. He's in no condition to answer questions." It came from the third man in the room, the one who'd been standing. A sawbones.

I could hear chairs scraping and the thatch of white hair faded away. I closed my eyes. The whiteness was whiter than it had been before, and my back throbbed. I could feel myself drifting away. My wife, my friend, my brother. That was all. No one else there. Who stabbed me? Yeah, it was a good question, copper. Only, I couldn't answer it.

Then the sawbones was beside my bed. "All right, Charley," he said. "It's up to you. If you want to get well, you can. If you don't want to, you won't."

After he left, I wondered if I wanted to get well. And I wondered if I wanted to know who did stab me—which one of them, or which two, or was it all three? I drifted off again, and then I was awake with a start. I knew I'd had a nightmare but I couldn't remember it; all I could remember was the question, "Who stabbed you?" And all of a sud-

den I had to know. I had to find out.

The white wasn't so glaring when I woke again and I could tell daylight from darkness and see the face of the nurse and I could lie there with my eyes closed and not drift off when I tried to remember.

My wife, my friend, my brother. My new wife, just four hours a bride. My old friend. My kid brother. It had to be one of them—and it could be any one. Carny people, all three. You can't trust carny people. I know—because I'm a carny man myself.

That afternoon the coppers came back, the big one with the thick patch of white hair, and the little guy trailing behind him. They sat down beside my bed. The big one stared at his hands for a while and then he said, "Who done it, Charley?"

"I dunno," I said. "I don't remember."

"They was four of you," he went on. "You and a blonde and two men. One of the men was short and stocky, and one of 'em tall and thin. You was drinking and raising a fuss in a rooming-house. The place got quiet, along about two in the morning. And about seven, the landlady found you lying in the alley—bleeding

like a hog. They're gone, the other three. The landlady says she don't know them, she ain't even got their names. Who was they, Charley?"

I shook my head. "Marks, that's all. Characters I met in some slop joint. I dunno, Lieutenant."

"It's sergeant, Charley. And don't be a sucker all your life. Who was they, Charley? Who stabbed you?"

"I dunno. I never saw them before and I must'a passed out before they stuck me. I dunno, Lieutenant."

He sat up straight, a great big man with a great big head and a lot of white hair on it. "Well, it's up to you, Charley. It ain't a murder this time. It ain't even in the newspapers. If you say so, we gotta let it go. It's up to you."

So they let it go. The days went by. The throb in my back became a dull ache, and then it went away. They released me from the hospital. After three weeks they released me. I hiked along the pavements alone. My wife, my brother, my friend—they weren't there to take me home. Three weeks, and they didn't drop in to see me. They didn't telephone or write. I was alone, and it was up to me. Who

stabbed you, Charley? Which one?

The rooming-house was a great big place, a hundred years old maybe, with a hundred rooms in it and a fat, ugly landlady just as big and just as old.

"Oh, it's you," she said after she answered the doorbell. "I thought you were a gonner, all right, when I found you."

"I'm not," I told her. "But what about the others? What happened to them?"

"They left."

"Did they tell you where they were headed or leave a forwarding address or anything?"

"They were gone when I found you," she said. "They snuck out in the middle of the night, and they didn't leave nothing but you lying in the alley bleeding to death."

The landlady wasn't any help.

At the bank I found out I still had four hundred bucks left. I took it out. Then I thumbed through the phone book under *Private Detective*. Chester Jonas was the name I picked; somehow you don't figure a monicker like Chester for a grifter.

Chester was a beagle-eyed, sharp-nosed, skinny little runt.

"Well, sir," he said, "well, sir, what brings you here? You want

a divorce, somebody owes you money, somebody skipped town, what?"

"Somebody skipped town," I told him.

I gave him my brother's name, Eddie Pierce. And my friend Whitey's, Jonathan Crisset. And my wife's, before she married me, Maisie Ledman. And their descriptions, and the address of the rooming-house.

"They skipped town," I told him. "Three weeks ago. I want to know where they are, that's all. You find them. I'll collect what they owe me."

I didn't give him the rest of it. Why should I? What else did he need to know? Find 'em, that was his job. I left out about Eddie and Whitey and me being carny men most of our lives. About Maisie being a carny girl, a kootch dancer, smooth and shiny, with a flat tummy and good curves and corn-yellow hair and big, dreamy eyes. About how she showed up for our date four weeks ago and I fell for her like a mark from the hay country. About us getting hitched after a six-day stand, and renting a room in the city and stocking up on liquor and throwing a wing-dinger, until I passed out and somebody stuck a shiv in my back.

Why tell him it was my wife, or my brother, or my friend, who took me?

"Where do I look for them?" he asked me.

"They're carny people," I said. "They'll be playing a show somewhere, maybe not far away."

He thought it over. "Well, sir," he said, "I'll try to trace them from the rooming-house. That'll be two hundred and fifty bucks for the first week, while I'm working on it personally. Afterward, if it's a matter of circularizing the carnivals, we'll cut it 'way down, maybe fifty bucks for the whole deal, plus expenses."

It sounded reasonable enough, like he might not be out to take me for all it was worth, so I handed over the two hundred and fifty.

"Where do I find you?" he asked.

"I'm a carny man, too," I said, and I gave him the name of the show. That was all I could do; I didn't know where it was playing. Then I left.

In this town the carny folks hang out at the Hotel Kramer, a dumpy flea-bag on the west side. I took me a room there, and inside half an hour I knew where the show was playing—a little town named Waterloo. My back

was throbbing, beat, beat, beat, like all the blood vessels in the body were tied up there in one knot. That night I dreamed that we were renting the room again, the four of us, with the liquor in great big paper bags. When I opened one of the bags, all that was in it was a shiv.

When I woke up the back was pounding, and there was a little blood on the sheets. The wound had opened up again during the night. But I'd seen enough of the sawbones. I hopped a dusty, dirty, slow rattler to Waterloo.

THAT was murder, that trip. The train banged and jerked and swayed. It took six hours. My back was bleeding again—I could feel it—and so raw and sore I had to spend most of the six hours leaning forward with my elbows on my knees. When we hit Waterloo I got off the train, bent over like an old man, shaky and sick. I had to find another sack to lie down on for a couple hours.

The show was running full tilt that night when I finally reached it. It was like coming home to me. The smell of the sawdust and the ferris wheel grinding and kids bawling all over the lot and the merry-go-round with its tinny mu-

sic, playing the same tunes it played three weeks ago, and it would play all summer. The concessions and the dice tables and the semi-circle of tractor-trailers the carny people live in, and the airplane spin—and the same old rat game, wide open and doing a big business.

My rat game. The one I owned and operated myself. Going for a big play, piling up my money for somebody else.

I stumbled over to it. I hiked up to the counter and put a dime on the red, three to one, and watched the rat dive into the blue cup and watched Whitey sweep up my dime and all the other dimes on the counter.

Yeah, Whitey. Jonathan Cris-set. My best friend. The fellow who'd walked out on me when I was stabbed and who'd taken over my game and my money now.

He swept up the dimes on the counter and he dumped the rat out of the blue cup and into the can in the middle of the wheel and he hollered, "Ten cents. Ten cents! Put your money on the line! Ten cents, ten to one; bet a dime and make a dollar!" And he spun the wheel.

Then he saw me.

My back was burning again. Whitey had two heads, one be-

side the other; two mouths, both of them wide open; four eyes, big and round; and four cheeks, very pale.

"Charley!" both mouths cried.

Two rats jumped out of the cone in the middle of the wheel and scurried into two blue cups on the rim, and both Whiteys said, "Tell me it's you, Charley! Tell me it ain't your ghost, Charley! Tell me you ain't dead!"

"No," I said. "I ain't dead, Whitey. You didn't quite make it, boy."

"Not me!" the two Whiteys cried. "I swear it, Charley! Not me!"

The counter was crowded and some farmer on the other side let out a bellow, "Four to one! Pay off, buddy, four to one! You got a winner over here!"

So both Whiteys had to hike around the counter, sweeping up the dimes on the red and the green and the black and all the other colors except the blue—and paying off, four to one, on the blue. Everything was swaying and shaking. The two Whiteys turned into four Whiteys and the counter got higher and higher until it clipped me under the chin, and then I was flat on the ground in the dirt. My back was a blazing, raging fire. Things were going

round and round, and covered with smoke.

When I came to, I was stretched out on a cot in a truck trailer. Julie was cutting the bandage off my back. Whitey was parked on a stool at the head of the cot, just *one* Whitey. I must have been feeling better.

Julie was the show boss's daughter. "We sent for a sawbones, Charley," she said.

"Not for me," I told her. "I had one once."

"Don't be a sap! Besides, he'll be here in a minute."

A nice kid, Julie. She climbed out of the trailer. Whitey said:

"Look, Charley, it wasn't me. I swear it."

So maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was.

"You passed out," Whitey said. "Like a turkey. Me, I was rocky, too. So I ankled around the block by myself—and when I come back, that was it. Everybody was gone and all the liquor was gone, too. So I took off through the alley. And there you were, cold, carved up. I thought you was dead."

I said, "And—"

"Well, what did you want me to do?" he asked. "Hang around and take a pinch? I thought you was cold, Charley, honest, so I lit

out. I was rocky and scared and all I thought was, I don't want no pinch. Not then. I wasn't thinking clear then, Charley."

"You was thinking pretty clear when I came up, Whitey. You didn't miss any dimes on the counter."

"Look, Charley," he said, "whadda you want me to do? Let the rats die? Close up the game? I been running it, sure, but the dough's yours. You can ask Cooper what we took in these three weeks. It's waiting for you. Only you'd ought'a give me thirty percent—I been running it all alone."

"Sure," I told him. "Thirty percent. It ain't as good as my regular sixty-seven percent, is it, Whitey?" That's the split, see? Sixty-seven for me, thirty-three for Cooper who runs the show. And I give you seventeen percent out of my share.

"I don't want your game, Charley," he said. "I didn't carve you up for no rat game. Honest. Look. I think it over, Charley, and I come back here. I wouldn't do that if I cut you—would I, Charley? The law's sure to find me here, Charley. If I cut you I'd hide out, wouldn't I? Like them other two?"

"All right, all right, Whitey?"

I yelled. "So it wasn't you!" And I turned my head away. So it wasn't my friend. That left my wife and my brother. My brother and my wife—hiding out. Carving me up, and then hiding out. I didn't want to think about it.

"Thirty percent until I get back on my feet, Whitey," I told him. "But no longer. Maybe I'll be back tomorrow."

I wasn't, though, because the sawbones showed up then, a farmer sawbones, and he sewed my back together again and told me to stay in the trailer. Then he jabbed a needle in my arm and gave me some pills. I figured that I might as well sleep. I didn't want to stay awake—and think about my brother and my wife.

But the best I could do was doze. The carny people came into the trailer all night. They came in to pat me on the head and ask how I was. Along about midnight, one of 'em parked on the stool at the head of the cot and stayed there. I finally drifted off.

When the gray light of dawn showed, I turned my head and saw what one of them it was. The crazy boy from the swamps. He was sitting there with his head on his chest like he was asleep. Only he wasn't. The crazy boy never sleeps.

You've seen crazy boys. Every big carny has one. He's the fellow with the reptile show, the one who eats worms and snakes and baby chickens alive. The cross-eyed kid with a big beard on his face and barefoot and filthy dirty. I've never known one of them to wash or take a bath.

All morning he sat there, his chin on his chest, while I thought about my wife and my brother. Where were they? Hiding out together someplace? Or was one of them lying in a ditch carved up like I'd been, except a little deeper and a lot longer-lasting? Which one?

I tried to sit up once. The crazy boy's head snapped back and he pulled a blackjack out of his jeans pocket.

"You lie down, Charley," he said. "Cooper tells me keep you down all day. Lie down."

I did. I lay there and thought about *them* again. Then I took some more pills and dozed.

My brother or my wife. Eddie or Maisie.

ALONG about noon Julie came in with some slop she'd fixed for breakfast. Me, I'd rather have a ham sandwich. You'll never find a carny girl who knows how to

cook. Whitey showed up and reported on the night's take.

Later, Cooper came in to see how I was.

"Coop," I said to him, "call the boy off, will you? I'm okay now. I gotta get at that game tonight."

"Let's see you sit up," Coop told me.

I tried to but each time I moved an inch I could feel the sides of the wound pulling on each other, stretching, burning, bringing the sweat out on my forehead.

"Not tonight, Charley," Coop said.

So I passed another night with the crazy boy while the merry-go-round wheezed out its songs, and the shills yelled and the kids bawled. The crazy boy sat there with his chin on his chest, his eyes closed, not saying a word. Some towns don't go for geeks, so I asked:

"What is it, a church town?"

"They don't like the swamp boy," he said.

That's the way it goes. You hit those blue-nosed counties with their reform laws, the first thing they stop is the crazy boy from the swamps and he sits around all week with nothing to do. Next are the kootchie dancers, and they head for the biggest city.

"They don't like girls, either," the crazy boy said. "Swamp boy, he likes girls."

Crazy? Well, you figure it out.

I slept some more that night, and I got so I could turn over on the cot and sit up. The next day I got Cooper to call off the crazy boy, and I went out to the stand early in the evening and took over from Whitey. Ten cents, folks. Put your dime on the line and win a dollar. Watch the rat, folks; he pays off three, five, ten to one.

Ever see a game like that? It's a great big wooden wheel on its side, maybe six feet in diameter. In the middle of it is a can and I dump a rat in the can. A guinea pig, really, not a rat, but the hicks get excited when you call it a rat.

All along the outside of the wheel are holes with their rims painted different colors, and under the holes are big tin cups. I spin the wheel, ring a bell and the rat jumps out of the can in the center of the wheel and heads for one of the holes—and jumps into the tin cup. You put your bets along the counter, a dime to a dollar, on a circle of the corresponding color. If the rat picks yours, I pay off—three to one on the green, brown and red; four to one on the blue; five to one on

the white and gray . . . and a big, fat ten to one on the black. Ten to one, folks, a dollar for a dime.

Simple, eh? At a good stand we rake in six hundred, a thousand, maybe fifteen hundred a week on those dirty rats.

Along about half-past six, before the crowd got too big, a character stepped up to the counter on my side. He was a skinny runt with eyes like a sick dog. Chester Jonas, the private dick.

"Well, sir," he said, "I've found you."

"Bet a dime and make a dollar," I hollered. "Everybody. Put your dimes down, folks. Make a fortune."

Surprised, he dug a dollar bill out of his pocket. Before he could put it back, I'd snatched it and tossed ten dimes on the counter, right on the blue circle.

"Pick your favorite colors and watch the rat," I yelled as I spun the wheel. The rat hopped out, moseyed around a bit, then ducked into the brown cup and I swept up the ten dimes.

"It's simple," I cried. "It's fun. It's profitable. A dime to a dollar."

The character kept his hands in his pockets for the next few plays and pretty soon the other

customers had wandered away.

"What's the gimmick?" he asked.

"Just outguess the rat," I told him.

"Don't give me that. Every game has a gimmick."

"All right," I said. "I'll level with you. It's sex."

"Sex?"

"Sure." I spun the wheel slowly and the rat ambled out and sniffed around a little, took after the yellow circle and chased it. "We keep a female rat in some of these cups all day," I explained. "Then when you spin the wheel slow the male rat smells the cup she's been in, a low-pay cup, and heads for it."

I gave the wheel a good, hard shove and it whirled around. The rat made a bee-line for the first hole, the black, ten to one. "If we want a couple good prices to attract the crowd," I went on, "we spin the wheel fast and the rat heads for the closest hole. That's all there is to it. Sex, buddy. That's what makes the wheel go around."

He scratched his head. "Well, I'll be dog-goned."

"Only," I said, "you got to change rats every half hour or so. A tired rat sort of loses interest in sex."

He looked around carefully, like he was afraid somebody might be listening. "They're in Baltimore," he said. "Two of them, one of the men and the babe."

"Baltimore?"

"That's right. I traced them to a cabbie who took them to the station and he hears them talking about how much is a ticket to Baltimore."

"Maybe they don't stop there," I said. "Maybe they keep on going."

"That's what I figured. Tomorrow I'll take the first train and pick up the trail there. Only—"

I pulled the scratch from my wallet. "How much?"

He shrugged. "I dunno. Depends on how long it takes. Maybe a couple hundred."

I gave him one. "Come back when that runs out."

He flushed. "Look," he said, "that don't last—"

But I spun the wheel. "Put your dimes down, folks!" I yelled. "Hurry, hurry, hurry! Only ten cents, and you get a dollar back. A winner every time."

Baltimore, I thought. That's a good carny town. Maybe they'd pick up a new show there.

The counter filled up. Whitey climbed in with me. Chester

Jonas was gone when I looked again. Baltimore. A girlie town. My brother and my wife. He was a good shill, Eddie was, and she was a girlie. That's all, a girlie. No matter what I'd thought before, I knew it now. They'd get by, my brother and my wife.

Along about midnight I ducked out and left Whitey to close up. When you close up a game like that, you count the money. I left Whitey to count the money. That shows how sick I felt. I headed for the sack.

Cooper was waiting for me. "Come along, Charley," he said. "You got company."

I had, all right, sitting in the trailer that serves as Cooper's office. The big, white-haired copper and his little side-kick—and the local law, some farmer sheriff with a mustache.

"I thought maybe you'd like to talk now, Charley," the big one said.

"Sure," I told him. "Like I talked before. I meet these marks in some bar and—"

"Was one of them your brother, Charley?" he asked.

So I didn't answer him. I watched the floor, instead.

"We fished him out of the river this morning," the copper went on. "Almost four weeks he'd been

in there, Charley, but the doc still found out a knife did the job—not the river. We still could tag him from his prints. Your own brother, Charley.”

“Yeah,” I said softly. “Yeah, my own brother.”

“So who were the others, Charley?” he asked.

I took a deep breath. “Like I told you, I meet these marks in some bar. I dunno who they are.” I got up and went out.

My friend, my brother, my wife. And who was left now? Who was the sucker now? Who was the biggest mark any carny ever knew? Me. Nuts about her, that’s why. Falling for a carny girl’s flat tummy and winding up with a sticker in my back and my brother in the river. Yeah, me.

JULIE was there in front of her father’s trailer. “Sneak me your old man’s bottle, will you, Julie?” I asked.

She did. “What’s the matter? Your back?”

“Yeah,” I told her. “And some of the things in front of it.”

It’s funny but at a time like that the bottle might as well have had water in it. I didn’t even notice what I drank.

“You’re a sucker, Charley,” Ju-

lie said. “Every carny man’s a sucker, and you were the biggest one of them all.”

There’s three things I don’t want anybody telling me how to handle. My money, my whiskey and my women. I had another slug and hit the sack. First, though, I took a couple of the pills the sawbones had given me. And even then I didn’t sleep easy. I could see Eddie’s body bobbing up and down in the slimy river, put there because I was the biggest farmer of them all, for a blonde head and a flat tummy.

Finally, though, I must have dozed off. The next I knew everything was dark and still. I couldn’t hear a sound and all I could see was a little sparkle of light, a sliver glinting in the moonlight, a reflection right over me shining on the blade of a knife a couple inches above my throat.

A big, hairy hand was gripping that knife and at the other end of the hand was the crazy boy from the swamps.

“Charley,” he whispered, “Charley, you awake?”

Yeah, I was awake. Wide awake. Afraid to move or breathe or talk. With the sweat popping out, and with my heart standing still.

"Charley," he asked, "you got any money?"

Yeah, I had some money. I slipped out from under that knife, watching it every second, keeping my eyes steady on it. In the dark I found my pants, and I dug the scratch out. I gave him a double sawbuck.

"Thanks, Charley," he said. He put the sticker in his belt and tiptoed out. And I followed him.

Because the swamp boy wasn't any stickup. He might be crazy, he might play both ends, but he wasn't any stickup.

He went around the back, in the open field, keeping close to the trailers. At the end of the row, another trailer had been swung into line. He headed for it, a shadow among shadows.

It hadn't been there that morning, this trailer. I recognized it. The girlie show. We were breaking up the next day, moving on upstate, and the girls had joined us for the move.

The girlie show, where I'd first met Maisie. And sure enough, she was standing in front of the trailer, her corn-yellow hair, glistening in the moonlight. Maisie. My wife. My bride. Cute as ever, smooth, soft, warm. Staring toward the truck I'd been sleeping

in, like she was watching for somebody, or something.

Maisie, the last one of the three. The last one left.

She was staring so hard that she didn't see or hear the swamp boy as he slipped up behind her. His knife was shining in the air, ready to plunge down into her lovely back.

"Look out!" I yelled. "Look out—behind you!"

She swung around. The swamp boy lunged at her.

I made it, somehow. I grabbed him around the throat with one arm and grabbed his wrist with the other hand. I pulled him away with all my strength. My back ripped and the blood surged out when I threw him on the ground.

Then I whirled on Maisie. Her face was white and she had her hand to her mouth. She was backing away from me.

"Charley!" she said.

"Yeah, Charley," I told her. "Your husband, remember?"

The swamp boy got up then. I wondered if I could make it, if I could grapple with him again. The blood was dripping down my back and it was hot and burning.

But I didn't have to.

"Charley," he asked, "why did you hit me?"

Why did I hit him?

"They give me ten to stick you, Charley—but you give me twenty to stick them. Why did you hit me?"

Yeah, he said "they." Not "her." They, two of them. I should have known Maisie couldn't have carried a body all the way to the river alone. I heard soft footsteps coming around the side of the trailer.

I whirled and there he was. Whitey. My pal.

My pal and my bride. And he was in front of me and he had a knife in his hand. She was behind me and you never know; she might have had a knife in her hand, too.

"I'm sorry, Charley," Whitey said. "We had to do it, Maisie and me. We was going to put the blame on Eddie until we had a good spot to get rid of you but they found him today. It's in the papers. You would of known. You would of told the cops. So we had to do it this way, Charley."

"Sure," I said. I was tired and my knees were wobbling and my back was burning and busted in two. I didn't care any more. "Sure, you had to, Whitey, once you started it. But why did you start it?"

"Why?" he asked. Even in the

dark I could see his eyes blazing. "Why? Because of my lousy, dirty seventeen percent! I work like a dog, Charley; I work harder than you do; I take care of the rats; I run the game. For a lousy seventeen percent! It ought to be my game, that's why, Charley. And it's going to be, see?"

"But Maisie," I said. "Not her."

"She's my sister, Charley. You didn't know that, did you? She was hitched once before and she used her husband's name. You thought she fell for you. You didn't know it was because of that sixty-seven percent we were after. And we had it for three weeks, Charley. But we didn't stick you hard enough. When we come back from tossing Eddie in the river, you were in the alley and people would see us. We thought you were dead, anyway. You might as well have been, Charley. You're gonna be."

Then he jumped at me, and I went down. My legs just gave out. The burn in my back was white hot and my head was exploding.

Somehow, though, I got my knees in the way and Whitey tripped over them. Somehow, I picked up a rock—and I let him have it on the side of his head. He passed out, and I did, too—just as the girls came tumbling

out of the trailer. Coop came running up, and grabbed Maisie.

Well, that was it. Whitey and Maisie were turned over to the local law—and they sang out the whole story.

We moved on next day, to a new stand upstate. That was it.

Except who should show when we'd been at the new stand a couple days but this character with the beagle nose and the sharp eyes. Chester Jonas, the private dick.

He stepped up to the board and he put a dime on the blue. "Well, sir," he said, "I got some news for you. They moved on from Baltimore. They're in Miami now."

Miami, huh! Chester, he should'a been reading the newspapers.

"Put your dime down, boys and girls!" I yelled. "Ten cents to a dollar! Get the bets down!" I spun the wheel slowly and Brother Rat jumped out and ambled around and slid into the blue hole, four to one.

I skidded four dimes across the counter to Beagle-Eyes. "Let it ride," I told him. "Build it up. See how far you can stretch a dime."

He did, and the rat picked out blue once more. Two bucks I gave

him and Beagle-Nose pinched it and the half dollar too, and stuck it all in his pocket. Nobody was playing but I spun it a couple more times anyway and the rat hit the blue each time.

"I'll need a couple hundred anyway," Beagle-Face said. "Expenses."

"Dollars for dimes," I hollered. "Ten bucks for one. Get the bets down!" I whirled the wheel again and the rat hit black this time, ten to one.

"Old rat's getting tired," I said to Chester Jonas. "That makes it an even bet. Why don't you put some money down, farmer?"

He shook his scrawny head. "Not with you spinning the wheel."

"Okay," I told him. "Spin it yourself. Come on, climb over."

He did, right into the booth. He spun the wheel once, and the rat hit the blue again.

"Make a bet," I told him. Then I saw Julie walking by. "Wait a minute. I got to see that babe."

I ducked out and caught her in front of the ferris wheel. "Julie," I said, "why don't you learn how to cook?"

She looked at me like I was crazy.

"You're not a carny girl," I told her, "but you cook like one. Why don't you learn?"

"Charley," she said, and her voice was soft and low, "you're nuts."

I went back inside the booth and spun the wheel myself, letting my hand hit each cup as it went by. Sure enough, he'd changed them. The pay-off cup was under the black now, ten to one.

"Go ahead, make a bet," I told him.

He plumped a ten down on the black. "Too much?" he asked.

"You're the bettor. Ten, twenty, fifty, anything you say."

He put a hundred down and grabbed the wheel to spin it.

"Why don't you change the rat?" I asked him. "He's tired." I picked him out of the can and Beagle-Beak took another rat, the only one in there, out of a cage under the counter, and put it in the can.

"Okay," I said. "Let's go. Is that your bet?"

He took another hundred, in tens and twenties, out of his billfold and plunked it on the black. I tossed a half dollar on top of it to weigh it down.

Then he spun the wheel, slow, very slow. The rat popped out and strolled around the wheel, sniffing at each of the cups. It sniffed at the black then it ducked into the green and I swept up the two hundred.

"Wait a minute!" he bellowed. "Wait a minute! You cheated me!" He blustered and fumed while I put the rat back into her solitary cage. Yeah, *hers*. I'd slipped a tarp over the other cage, with ten males in it, while Beagle-Head was climbing over the counter. The females don't go for the smell like the males do. They stay away from it.

Well, it was his own fault. Miami, huh? Funny, isn't it, how everybody tries to take a carny man?

Complete Suspense Novel

THE Frigid Flame

Dave loved Peggy—despite the ugly rumor that she had murdered her husband.

1

IT WAS a pretty brisk day, as I recall. Sky a little overhung, the palisades greyish behind the mist.

by
**RICHARD
MATHESON**

Reprint of the LION Novel, "Someone Is Bleeding." Copyright, 1953, by Richard Matheson.

I suppose that's why the beach wasn't too crowded. Then again, it was a weekday and school hadn't let out yet. June. Put them together and what have you got?

A long stretch of beach with just her and me.

I'd been reading. But it got tiresome so I put the book down and sat there, arms around my knees, looking around.

She had on a one-piece bathing suit. Her figure was slight but well placed. I guessed she was about five-five. She was gazing intently at the waves. Her short-cropped blonde hair was stirring slightly in the breeze.

"Pardon me but could . . ." I said.

She wasn't turning. She kept looking at the shifting blue ocean. I looked over her figure again. Very well placed. A model's figure. The kind you see in *Mademoiselle*.

"Have you the time?" I asked.

She turned then.

Eyes. That was my first impression. The biggest and the brownest eyes I'd ever seen, great big eyes seeming to search for something. A frank look, a bold one, meaning a bold curiosity. But no smile. Deadpan. Did you ever have a child watch you from the seat in front of you in a bus?

That's what it was like.

Then she lifted her arm and looked at her watch. "One thirty," she said.

"Thank you," I answered.

She turned away. Her eyes moved to the sea again. I felt the uneasiness of the unconsolidated beachhead.

I rested on my elbows and looked at her profile. Delicately upturned nose. Lovely mouth. And those eyes.

After watching a while to catch her eyes again, I gave up. I was no professional at pickups. I got up slowly and walked down to the water. I felt her eyes following me.

I didn't leap in like athletes do. I stalled, I edged, I shivered. I evolved quick arguments for forgetting the whole thing.

Then I slid forward with a shudder and swam out a little way. Body heat took up the chills, my blood started moving.

On my back, looking up at the sky I wondered if I should speak to her. Whether it was worth it.

Then, when I came dripping back, she asked me if the water were cold.

I jumped at the opening.

"Pretty cold," I said. "I'll give you ten dollars if you go in."

She shook her head with a smile.

"Not me," she said.

I dried myself.

"Does the weather get cold out here?" I asked her. Weather talk, I thought. Always an ample wedge.

"It gets cold at night," she said.

The eyes intent on me again. I almost felt restive. They *were* searching.

I edged a little closer to her blanket.

"Well, I've just come from New York," I said, "and I came to get warm."

"Oh," she said, "is it cold there?"

Weather talk. Enough to start on. We eased into other things. California. New York. People. Cars. Dogs. Children.

"Do you like good music?" she asked me.

"What's good music?" I asked.

"Classical music."

"Sure," I said, "I love it."

The eyes looking harder. Was that the basis of the search?

"Gee," she said.

She sat hugging her knees. The filtering sunlight touched her white shoulders. She couldn't have been more than seventeen, I thought.

I was smiling. "Why gee?" I asked her.

"Because men never like good music," she said. "My . . ."

She stopped. Her eyes lowered.

"What's the Hollywood Bowl like?" I asked her, not wanting to let conversation run down.

She was looking again, shaking her head.

"I don't know," she said, "I sure wish I could go, though."

Too easy, I thought. Where is the hedging, the sly evasions, the mental sparring of a he and she? The moxie?

No moxie in Peggy.

That was her name.

"What's yours?" she asked.

"David," I said, "David Newton."

And so we talked. I'm trying to remember the significant things she said. They came out once in a while in between straight data about her mother, dead, her father, a retired navy man, her profession none and her spirit, obviously stepped on somewhere.

She saw my book and asked what it was. I told her, and we got started on the subject of historical novels.

"They're dirt," she said, "nothing but sex."

Something in her eyes. A hardness. I said why read them if they offend her.

"I'm looking for a decent one," she said.

"I'll write one," I said.

Obvious move. Impress the little girl. I am a writer, what do you think about that, my young lady?

She didn't catch it.

We kept skating around with words. Talking about home and background, school and other things. I told her I'd graduated from the University of Missouri Journalism School three years before. She told me about traveling around with her mother, father and brother until her mother died, then she and Phillip, her brother, not being able to follow the old man from one base to another anymore. So they stayed in San Francisco with a friend of her mother's.

"She was a swell woman," Peggy said. "But her husband—"

"What about him?"

"He was a pig," she said.

A significant remark. Not to me at the time. But later I understood.

Now, though, I just listened halfway, devoting the other half of my attention to looking at her almost child-like face. At the way her hair was parted on the right, the boyish wave of blonde hair over the left part of her forehead.

The full lips, delicately red. And those eyes.

How could a face like that give you premonitions? It just didn't. And that was too bad.

We were in the middle of a discussion on jazz when she stood up.

"I have to go," she said.

I felt myself start. I'd almost forgotten we'd just met.

She began to put on her jeans and blouse.

"Well, I have to get back to my novel too," I said standing up. Trying again.

"Oh, that," she said, frowning.

"No, one I'm writing, not reading," I said, giving up subtleties.

We scuffed across the warm sands.

"Gee," she said, "you like good music and you write."

She shook her head. I got the impression she was confused.

"Is it so strange?" I asked.

"Men aren't sensitive enough to do things like that."

We reached a corner on Arizona and she started to turn off. I fiddled around, asking for her phone number, and she fiddled back, finally giving it to me with a brooding reluctance. I memorized the number.

We said goodbye and I watched her walking down toward Santa

Monica Boulevard. She moved with a relaxed, effortless grace.

I turned away. I went home and worked on the book with a renewed vigor.

That afternoon I sent a card to a friend in New York. *Met me a cute gal*, it read. *Glad you aren't here.*

That evening I remembered something. I remembered that I'd forgotten to write down her telephone number and now it was gone from my mind.

I WENT to the beach every day for a week but I saw no Peggy Ann.

I gave up three days and wrote heavily. Then, on the fourth day, I got up late, couldn't get up the fortitude to sit in front of my typewriter, ended up by putting on my bathing suit and leaving for the beach.

And while down there, happened to glance up and saw her walking across the sands. My heart beat harder. I realized I'd been waiting for her. Again.

She didn't see me. She was sitting on her blanket rubbing cocoa butter over her legs when I came up with my blanket and clothes.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello, Davie," she said.

It made me feel strange. No one, since my mother, had called me that. Davie. There was something about it.

"I was going to call you," I said, "but I forgot your number and your name wasn't in the directory."

"Oh," she said. "No, I live with another couple and the phone is under their name."

She seemed a little evasive that day. She avoided my eyes, kept looking down at the sand. Then, when she tried, without success, to put the cocoa butter on her back, I offered my services.

She sat stiffly as I rubbed my hand over her sun-warmed back. I noticed how she kept biting her lower lip. Worriedly.

"I . . ." she started to say once and then stopped. She sat quietly. Finally she drew in a deep breath.

"I have something to tell you," she said.

I felt myself tremble slightly. She sounded so serious.

"Go ahead," I told her.

"I'm divorced," she said.

I waited.

"Yes?" I said.

Her throat moved. "That's all," she said, "I—I just thought you might not want to go out with me when you knew—I—"

"Why not?"

She started to say something, then shrugged her shoulders helplessly.

"I don't know," she said, "I just thought."

She looked so young, so timorous.

"Don't be silly, Peggy," I said, quietly.

She turned in surprise.

"What did you call me?" she asked.

"Peggy," I said. "That's your name isn't it?"

"Yes, but—" She smiled at me. "I didn't think you'd remember."

She shook her head in wonder. "I'm so surprised."

It was one of those things about Peggy. The littlest thing could delight her. Like when I brought her an ice cream cone later that morning.

It might have been a diamond ring.

Peggy lived on Twenty-sixth Street off Wilshire.

It was Sunday night and I was walking up the quiet tree-lined block looking for her house. It was to be our first date.

There were two things in front of the house. An old Dodge. A man watering the lawn. The car was a 1940 model. The man about a 1910 model, pudgy and

pasty faced, wearing most unflattering shorts.

"Peggy Lister live here?" I asked him.

He looked at me with watery blue eyes. His expression was dead. He held the hose loosely in his hands. His head jerked a little.

"She lives here," he said.

I felt his eyes on me as I stood on the porch. Then Peggy opened the door.

With heels on she was tall, about five ten, I guess. She wore a sweater and skirt, a brown sport jacket. Her shoes were brown and white, carefully polished. Her hair had been set and combed out painstakingly. She looked wonderful.

"Hello, Davie," she said. "Won't you come in?"

I came in. Those big brown eyes surveyed me.

"You look nice, Davie," she said.

"You look terrific."

Again. Surprise. A half-quizical smile which seemed to say—oh, you're just fooling me.

Just then an older woman came out of an adjoining room.

"Mrs. Grady, this is David Newton," Peggy said.

I smiled politely, said hello. Noticed that Mrs. Grady was one

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of those unfortunate women suffering from progressive ugliness.

"Going out?" asked Mrs. Grady.

"We're going to get acquainted," Peggy said.

Mrs. Grady gave us a nod. Then she leaned over and called out the window.

"Supper's on, Albert."



We went to the front door and passed Albert. He gave me a sullen look. And her a look. A look that made me start. Because there was almost a possessiveness in it. It gave me an odd feeling.

"Who is that guy anyway?" I asked as we started down the street.

"Mr. Grady," she said.

"That look he gave you," I said.

"I know."

That expression was on her face again. Not quite identifiable. Mostly disgust. But there was something else in it too. I wasn't sure but it might have been fear, I thought. The fear of a child

who has come upon something it does not quite understand yet instinctively shrinks from.

I decided to change the subject.

"Where would you like to go?"

I asked.

"I don't care," she said, brightening. "Where would you?"

"A movie?" I suggested, without really thinking.

"Well—"

"What am I talking about?" I said. "I don't want to go to a movie. I want to talk to you."

She smiled at me.

"I'd like to talk, Davie," she said.

We went down to Wilshire to the Red Coach Inn for a few drinks. A cute little place; intimate, booths, a man playing casual organ music.

She ordered a vodka Collins and I ordered a Tom. Then she turned to me and, casually, said:

"I think I should tell you I'm madly in love with you."

I took it for a gag, of course.

"Splendid," I said. "That's grand."

But her face wasn't smiling. It made me feel a little restless. Sometimes you couldn't tell what Peggy meant.

We drank a little. It was quiet.

"Would you like to come to a

party with me?" she said. On the spur of the moment it seemed.

"Why—sure," I said.

"Good," she said.

"Where is it?"

"At my lawyer's house," she said.

"You have a lawyer?"

"He handled my divorce," she said.

I nodded. I asked her where the house was. She said, "Malibu."

"How will we get there? I plan to get a car but I haven't yet."

"We can get a ride," she said confidently.

Then the confidence seemed to slip. She fingered her glass nervously.

"Davie," she said.

"What?"

"Will you—will you promise me something?" I hesitated. Then I asked what.

"Well, I—"

She looked irritated at her own fluster. "These parties are so—" Again she halted; then: "You're a gentleman."

"I am?"

"I mean," she went on, "you know how these parties are. Actors and actresses and—well, usually they get all drunk and the men start to. . . ."

"You want me to promise not to touch you?"

"Yes."

I didn't like to say it. She looked delicious then, in that soft light. But I nodded. "All right," I said.

She smiled gratefully.

After a few drinks we started down Wilshire again, headed for the ocean.

"I wish I did have a car," I said.

"It's all right," Peggy said.

We walked and talked. Peggy told me about her mother. Her mother had died when Peggy was twelve.

"Tell me about your marriage," I asked once.

"There's nothing to tell," she said and that was all I could get out of her.

WHEN we walked past my room I asked her if she'd like to come in and read some of my published stories. Strange, it didn't seem wrong with Peggy. With any other girl I would have felt obvious, but with Peggy I couldn't even conceive of anything under the table. She had too much—what's the word? Class, I guess you'd have to call it.

Peggy sat on my bed and looked at my stories. I sat across the room by my typing table. I watched her draw up her shapely legs and rest one of them under her, then draw the slip and skirt down. Watched her as she took off her jacket, as she leaned against the wall reading, watched her large brown eyes reading my words. Living in them. She was right there.

She looked up after reading the first one.

"My goodness," she said, awed. "I had no idea."

"Of what?" I asked.

"Of how—deep you are."

I chuckled self-consciously. "I've done better," I said.

She shook her head wonderingly. "You're so sensitive," she said. "Men aren't sensitive but you are."

"Some men are, Peggy," I said.

"No," she said. And she really believed it. "They're pigs. They don't care anything about beauty."

Was that her marriage talking? I wondered. What had it really been like to put that look of bitter conviction on that sweet face?

All I could do was shrug. Feeling a little helpless before her complete and dismaying assurance.

"I don't know, Peggy." I shouldn't have said it.

"I do," she answered.

And there was hurt there too. She couldn't hide it. I didn't want to spoil the evening. I tried to let it go.

But Peggy wasn't finished.

"I've seen it time and again," she said. "My uncle left my aunt with three children to support. The husband of the woman my brother and I stayed with was a drunkard. Phillip and I used to lie in bed on Saturday and Sunday nights and listen to the man beat his wife with his fists."

"Peggy, those are only two examples. In my own family I can give you four examples of happy marriages."

She shook her head. She read some more. And her jaws were held tightly. I sat there looking at her sadly. Wondering if there were anything I could do to ease that terrible tension in her.

The night seemed to disappear, Houdini-like. The first thing I knew we were walking back on the block off Wilshire. It was a nice, starry night. The street was dark and quiet. Peggy took my arm as we walked.

"I *do* like you," she said. "You talk my language."

We talked of different things. Nothing important.

"I should work," she said, a little ashamed. "It's not very honorable to live on—my alimony. But—" She looked at me as if almost pleading. "I don't know how to do anything, and I dread the idea of working in a ten-cent store or something. I did that when I was married. It's—awful."

I patted her hand.

A little later. "Where does your husband live, Peggy?"

"Do we—have to talk about it, Davie? Please."

"I'm sorry," I said.

It was when we were walking past the little park between 24th and 25th Streets:

"Would you like to sit in the park a while?" she asked me.

"Sure," I answered.

So we sat on the grass looking over the mirror-like pond. Watching the moon saucer that floated on the water surface. Listening to a basso frog giving out his roundelay for nothing.

We didn't talk. I listened to her breathing. I glanced at her and saw her looking intently at the pond. Felt her hand on the ground and covered it with mine. And, naturally, without forcing it, found my head resting against hers. Her cheek was firm, soft.

The cologne she wore was a delicious, delicate fragrance.

And, then, in a moment, casually, I kissed the back of her neck. Long.

She didn't move. She shivered. Didn't struggle. But her hands tightened on the grass and pulled some out. I wondered what her lowered face was like.

I withdrew my lips. Her breath stopped, then caught again. In time with mine? I wondered.

Her throat moved. "Wow," she said.

I guess I laughed aloud. Of all the words in the world, it was the last I expected.

Peggy looked hurt, then offended. I quickly apologized.

"The word seemed so odd right then," I explained.

"Oh," she smiled, a little awkwardly. "No one ever kissed me like that," she said.

I looked at her in amazement. "What? *No* one?"

She shook her head.

"But—your husband?"

Her lips tightened. "*No*," she said. She shuddered and her hands tightened into hard fists. "*No*," she said again.

"I'm sorry," I said.

She shook her head. "It's not your fault. You just don't—realize. What it was like."

I put my arm around her.

"Peggy," I said, softly.

When we reached the front of her house I took her in my arms and kissed her. Her warm mouth responded to me.

I left her three times. Then, each time, turned to look back. And saw her standing by the picket fence that glowed whitely in the moonlight. And she was looking after me. The way a frightened and lonely child looks after its departing parent.

I kept going back. Holding her. Feeling her press her face against my shoulder. Whisper. "Davie. Davie."

It was while I was walking away the third time that the big car passed me. I didn't notice it. At least not any more than I'd notice any car that passed me on a dark street in the early morning. We'd sat talking till way after midnight.

But at Wilshire I stopped to go back again.

And found the car parked in front of her house. Right behind Albert's old Dodge. I saw a man at the wheel wearing a chauffeur's cap. He was slumped down, staring at the windshield.

Another man was at the door. He had on a topcoat, a Homburg.

At first I thought, Oh my God,

it's her husband and he's a millionaire. I felt like creeping away.

Then I saw her framed in the doorway and I suddenly knew I couldn't leave and I had to know who this man was. I walked past the Cadillac, a sleek, black job. I glanced at her room which faced the street. But the shades were drawn. I turned into the alley and walked up to the side window of her room. I stood there in the darkness, holding my breath. The window was open. I could hear her voice.

"You shouldn't come here like this," she was saying, "at this time of night. What will the landlady say?"

"Never mind that," said the man. "I was talking about something else."

"I said no and I mean it."

Silence a moment. The man's voice again.

"And who's the new one?"

She didn't answer. I felt my brow knitting. Because the man's voice was familiar.

"Some poor fool who—" he started.

"Oh leave me alone, will you?" she burst out.

"Peggy."

The voice was low and it warned. "Don't keep trying my

patience. Even I have a limit. Even I, Peggy."

I heard her skirt rustle, then a long silence. I tried to hear. I tried to look under the shade. Nothing to see or hear. I imagined. I'm good at that.

"Jim," she said, "Jim—no."

Another connection. Not quite secure. The voice. The name.

Then I heard the back screen door shutting and I walked down the alley. As I turned onto the sidewalk I saw a dark figure coming up the alley. Albert. I recognized the form. I didn't know whether he was just out for the air or whether he was going to listen at the window too.

It didn't matter to me.

I'd had enough. I stalked past the black Cadillac and walked quickly toward Wilshire. In my mind I kept seeing her in the man's arms, being kissed, minutes after I had kissed her. Kissing him the way she kissed me. Peggy, the new, the bright; Peggy, the deceiving one.

Goodbye Peggy Ann.

THERE was someone scratching on my screen.

I raised up on one elbow and looked at the window. She was looking in. She knocked at the

door then. I hesitated. Then I relaxed.

"Come in," I said.

She was carrying her bathing suit and a towel in one hand. A grease-spotted paper bag in the other.

I looked at her clinically.

"I brought doughnuts for breakfast," she said.

Still no answer from me. She caught the look. Peggy was always quick at that. She knew the moment your feelings toward her chilled. Her face fell.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

I didn't answer. Her face was disconcerted. The face I was beginning to love. I tried to fight that but it was just about impossible.

She turned away sadly. "I'll go," she said.

I didn't feel anything until her hand touched the doorknob. Then it seemed as if someone were wrenching at my insides.

"Peggy."

She turned to look at me. Her face blank.

I patted the bed. "Come here," I said.

She stood there, looking hurt. She tried to flint her features, failed, tried again. I patted the bed a second time.

"Sit down, Peggy," I said.

She sat down gingerly.

"I haven't done anything," she said.

"I came back last night," I said.

At first she didn't understand. Then her face tightened.

"You saw Jim," she said.

"Is he your husband?"

"He's my lawyer," she said.

Last connection. The voice, the name, the profession.

"What's his last name?" I asked.

"Vaughan," she said.

"My God."

She looked at me in surprise. "What is it?"

"I know him," I said.

"You *do*?"

"We went to college together."

"Oh." Her voice was faint.

I shook my head. "My God," I repeated. "Jim Vaughan. Of all the crazy coincidences."

I turned to her.

"Is Jim in love with you?" I asked.

"I—" She looked helpless.

"Is he?"

"I don't know."

"Isn't he married anymore?" I asked.

"They're going to be divorced," she said.

Audrey divorced. I saw her face at college, in my mind. Adoring Jim Vaughan. Divorced.

"Is Jim's brother here too?" I asked.

"Yes."

"My God, it's so fantastic."

I saw that look again and let it go for the moment though there were still many questions I wanted to ask. Jim and I had known each other very well at the University of Missouri.

"It's his party we're—supposed to go to?" I asked.

She looked at the floor. "I suppose you're not going now," she said.

"I don't know," I said. "I'd like to see him again. But if he's in love with you it would be a—little strained."

"If you don't want to," she said.

"Don't you think he'd mind?" She didn't answer.

"Peggy, come on."

"I had no idea you knew him. But—what difference does it make? I asked you to go with me."

I remembered something.

"Poor little fool," I said. "Why that snotty son. He's as smug as ever. Sure, I'll go. I just want to see his face when he sees me walk in with you."

I was putting the polishing

touches to my bow tie when the car horn honked outside.

I found the black Cadillac waiting.

Peggy was inside, the door open.

"Hi," she said. "Come on in."

I got in. The door shut and the car pulled away from the curb. Good God, I was thinking, this ices the cake.

Peggy smiled at me.

"What's the scoop?" I asked, quietly so the driver couldn't hear.

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't say we were going in Jim's own car."

"What's the difference?"

I started to answer. Then I chuckled. "Jim will do nip-ups."

"Why?"

She actually didn't know. Not my Peggy Ann Lister, divorced and very wonderful.

I patted her hand.

"Here is the picture, my dear," I said. "You taking Jim's rival to Jim's party in Jim's car. You get it?"

She looked blank. "You're no rival," she said.

It was my turn to look blank. Maybe she was naive, I thought.

I took a closer look at the driver. Affluence, I was thinking. Jim has done well for himself. A

Caddy, a chauffeur, a house at Malibu.

But the chauffeur didn't fit. Not quite. Rich men's chauffeur's have non-committal features. They match the upholstery.

Not Walter Steig. That was his name. Steig stood out like a keg of beer among wine glasses. Big and stolid. His face and neck were reddish. He looked like a left-over from the Third Reich. Big and brutish with closely cropped hair of greyish-steel color. Rimless glasses and a stiff, unrevealing expression.

He turned the car onto Pacific Coast Highway and speeded up the ocean. Malibu, I thought, Jim *has* done well. A beach house probably. Fireplaces and french windows and opulence. Jim Vaughan.

I looked at Peggy.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to be rude. It's just that I can't help being surprised that you know Jim. That he's so well off. When I knew him he was—as poor as I am now."

That was poor.

She smiled back. My love was wearing a dark-blue dress that clung fittingly to her figure. Her blonde hair was brushed out again, haloing her head with light curls. Her skin was flawless.

No makeup other than lipstick.

Everything seemed fine.

The Malibu house was a lush two-story affair that rambled all over a hillside and ended up like a luxurious animal crouched on a cliff, peering down at the pounding surf way down below across the highway.

It was quite a place. Thick broadloom, everything smart and rich. Jim's taste, all right. I could see that.

"Well—"

And heard him. I turned and saw him standing, one foot below the other on the step that led to the raised living room.

Staring at me.

Prophetic, I thought, that the last time I had seen him and this first time again, the expression I saw was devoid of all concealment. With not enough time to combat shock, it was Jim Vaughan in the raw looking at me. The look had surprise in it. Surprise, and, no hiding it, although he did his best thereafter, distinct and obvious displeasure.

"David!"

The pose was back. His hand holding mine was firm. The smile, the look was one of pleasure.

"If this isn't a coincidence," he was saying.

"How are you, Jim?" I said.

No need to ask. He was in fine shape. From his well-trimmed head of red hair, down through his well-shaven, well-fed face, through his maroon dinner jacket, and down to his shiny, dark maroon shoes. Jim was all right. I almost felt like a tramp in my old jacket, one he'd seen at college no less. And that feeling was a new one for me. When I was with Jim especially.

I'd always felt at least equal, if not superior.

"What are you doing out here?" he was asking me.

His arm around Peggy's waist. Obviously. She looked a little pained but she didn't move away. The move made me feel strange. As if with one calm, assured gesture, Jim was removing her from my sphere.

"Writing," I said.

"Oh yes, of course," he said, as if he didn't know it. "You wrote."

His tendency towards smugness that I'd taken delight in puncturing at school had now blossomed into a full-fledged snobbishness. This, I suspected, was progress to Jim.

Then came a move which sort of put down the groundwork for the coming months.

"Peggy, I've got someone you must meet," Jim said.

THAT was the opener. There were other words, quickly spotted. But the kicker was me standing alone in the hallway. A few seconds after I'd met a guy who'd been a friend years before, I'd been dismissed that easily. Jim Vaughan discarding the past like a scab. He'd said, "We'll have to have a long talk," but I knew it was only words.

I saw him wedge Peggy into a mass of people standing up near a large fireplace which was crackling with orange flames. Peggy looked toward me once, apologetically. But it didn't much ease my irritation.

I went up the small staircase and into the huge living room. Just as expected. Lush. High-beamed ceiling, thick, wall to wall carpeting, huge, solid color furniture, copper lamps. Jim had it.

I looked around. At first I thought there would surely be someone I had known from college. He couldn't have discarded them all, he knew so many. If nothing else, there would be Audrey. She and I had been minor buddies at college.

No Audrey. I kept walking around adding unto myself a drink and a plate of well-catered canapes, a high-class antipasto. I stood, back to a wall-high picture window and surveyed the room full of affluent strangers. I got philosophic. I always do when I'm around people who all have more money than I do.

It was about that time that I saw Dennis.

He was sitting on a couch with a pretty young thing. He was glowering alternately into his drink and at the mass of people wherein stood Jim and Peggy.

I went over, sat down. I hadn't known Dennis at college except by sight. Flitting about the campus like a scholastic phantom, carrying books and a woman. Always a woman.

"Hi," I said.

The young thing showed her teeth.

Dennis looked at me with his dark eyes. He didn't answer.

"You don't remember me," I said.

"No, I don't," he agreed.

"I'm Dave Newton," I said. "I was a friend of Jim's at Missouri."

Recognition. But no pleasure.

"Oh yeah," he said.

I can't get on very well with people who won't talk.

"You've got quite a home here," I said.

"*Jim* has quite a home."

There it was. Plain as the nose on his sullen face. The resentment. I'd heard Dennis talk once at college. That was one day when I'd come up to him and Jim on the campus. Dennis had walked away saying, "Sure, *have* it your way. You always do anyway."

And Jim had said to me, faintly amused, "*That* is brother Dennis. The brat of the family."

Now, in the present, I saw that Dennis was still the brat of the family.

"Yeah," I said, for want of anything better.

Young thing coughed. Dennis didn't stir.

"I'm Jean Smith," came a gushing introduction. "Dennis is just *awful* about introductions."

I smiled and nodded. I forgot about her.

"Where's Audrey?" I asked Dennis.

He looked at me coldly a moment. I guess he didn't see what he was looking for. He turned away.

"She's sick," he said.

"That's too bad."

"Yeah, isn't it?" he said and

was up and moving for the bar. Jean Smith followed him.

I moved for the big group. It was obvious that Jim had no intention of sharing Peggy. She was private property. I stood behind Peggy Lister.

"Peggy, let's dance," I said.

Jim's smile was antiseptic. Toothpaste ad smile.

"Not right now, Dave," he said. "We're rather busy."

Then I was left to stand there, unintroduced, the ghost of Hamlet's father at Malibu. I felt a heat churning up in my stomach. I've got a temper. I'll be the last to deny that.

Peggy kept looking at me when she could, trying to smile. But Jim kept closing up the group by edging around so that his back was to me. I looked at the back of his neck. Jim Vaughan, I thought, my old buddy. You dirty, smug louse.

Why didn't she come to me, excuse herself? I figured that she was afraid to. She was a timid girl, really. She could be taken advantage of.

I listened to the talk awhile. Then when my arm muscles felt like rigid glass I just moved around and grabbed Peggy's hand.

"Come here, Peggy," I said

aloud. "There's someone you must meet."

I could feel their stares on me as I pulled her away.

"That wasn't very polite," she said.

I took her over to the small open portion of the floor where a few couples were dancing to record music.

"It wasn't polite to bring me here and ditch me, either," I said.

"I didn't do anything," she said. "He took me over."

"No, you never do anything," I said. "Peggy Lister, victim of fate."

SHE tried to draw away. I tightened my hold. "You're going to dance with me," I said.

She was quiet then. Her mouth was a resigned line. She held herself stiffly.

"My old friend Jim Vaughan," I said.

No answer.

"Peggy."

"What?"

"Do you want to meet the person I was going to introduce you to?"

No answer.

"Do you?"

"Who is it?" she asked, with false patience.

"Me," I said. "I'm all alone."

Her eyes on me. And softness coming back. I felt her hand on my shoulder tighten.

"Davie," she said, softly.

"How do you do," I answered.

Later. A bout. Jim taking her. Then me dancing with her. And both of us standing by, around eleven, while Dennis danced with her. Both of us trying to put on an air of Auld Lang Syne.

"I suppose Peggy has told you about our marriage plans," Jim said. Casually. Jim loved to flick off bombshells.

"No," I said, keeping it casual even though it killed me. "She didn't say anything."

"Well, it's understood," he said. The dampener. And was that a little threatening in his voice?

"Does Audrey understand?" I asked.

The twitching that presages a well reserved smile.

"She understands," said Jim Vaughan.

"The way Linda understood," I said.

Another twitch, without a smile this time. I knew he remembered as I did the time at college when I'd started to date Linda. Linda, who everybody but myself considered Jim's unringed fiancée.

And Jim had given me the low-down. Told me that he and Linda were going to be married. Although Linda didn't know it. Although Linda later on left him cold.

"That was a childish thing," Jim was saying now. "I'm past childish things."

I nodded. "I see." Then I said, "I hate to say it Jim but I'm in love with Peggy."

No sign. No hint. He gazed at me like an exterminator, sighting on his prey.

I smiled thinly. "I know it isn't very guest-like for me to tell you," I said, "especially after what happened with Linda but—well, there it is."

He looked at me as if making some sort of decision. His greyish-blue eyes examined me carefully through the lenses of his glasses. His thickish lips pursed slightly as he deliberated.

He decided.

"Come in here, David," he said. Father about to tell his son that the birds do more than fly and the bees buzz.

He led the way to the library. He ushered me in. The door closed off the sound of the party. He locked the door. We stood together in the quietude, sur-

rounded by the literature of the ages, all dusty.

"Sit down, David," he said.

I sat. I didn't know what to say. I decided to let him play the scene his own way.

"What has Peggy told you about herself?" he asked.

I sat quietly a moment, trying to figure out what his angle was. Jim was always trying for an angle. It might be hidden at first but it was always there. I knew that from school. He'd lead up, lead up, then sock you over the head with his *coup de grace*.

"Her family," I said. "Her life." I paused for effect. "Her divorce," I said, as casually as possible, figuring that it was the angle he was working on.

James Vaughan, late of Missouri farmtown, now of California society, raised his eyebrows. Most effectively. All right, let's have it, Jim, I wanted to say, you can spare the histrionics. I know you.

"That's what she told you," he said. "That she was divorced?"

"That's right."

A sinking sensation in my stomach. What in hell *was* he driving at?

He looked at me, still deliberately. Until the thoughts of what

he might be hiding started to make my skin crawl.

"What is it, for Christ's sake?" I asked.

He put one hand into his coat pocket.

"I don't know whether you'll believe what I tell you," he said.

"What?"

"Peggy isn't divorced," he said.

"She's still married?"

"No," he said, "not now."

"What about her husband?" I asked, perfect straight man for horror.

He hesitated. Then he said, "Murdered."

I felt the cold sickness explode in me because I knew his *coup de grace* before he said it.

"Peggy murdered him."

2

I SAT there and I felt as if the walls were tottering, ready to fall in on me.

"You're lying," I said, weakly, very weakly.

"Am I?"

And I couldn't convince myself that he was.

"I'll have Steig take you home," he said.

I looked up at him. His face was without expression. Certainly there was no sympathy there.

"I should see her," I said.

But without conviction. I didn't want to see her. I was afraid to see her.

"I think it would be foolish to see her," Jim said. And I let him tell me.

I found myself in the black Cadillac, and Steig pulled around the pear-shaped drive and onto the road that led precipitously down to the highway.

I sat in the car staring at the floor. And listening to the wind whistle by the car as it roared along the ocean at eighty miles an hour. Under a cold moon.

I wrote sporadically. I went to the beach, way up the beach, far from the spot where we'd met. I went to the movies. I read. And, from all activities, absorbed nothing. I was still half anesthetized. I hadn't known her long, a few weeks. But she'd gotten to me.

I thought about her after the first few days of deliberately avoiding any thoughts at all about her.

Murder?

I went to the library and looked through old papers. I didn't find anything. And when I thought some more I remembered about Linda and the lie Jim had told.

I went back to my love. Days after. In sorrow and repentance. And found her on the back lawn, trying to read. But just staring at the same page.

And she was cold at first be-



cause she'd been hurt. I didn't let it stop me. I was apologetic. I smiled at her and said again and again and again:

"I'm sorry, Peggy. I'm sorry."

"Murdered!" she said to me.

"Is that what he told you?"

I nodded, grimly.

She shook her head. "How could he?" And I felt some slight relish in seeing indications of the chinks in Jim Vaughan's self-forged armor.

"Why, though?" she said. "I didn't murder him."

"Where is your husband?"

"He's dead," she told me. "He died in San Francisco. A year ago."

We sat in the back yard talking. And she kept shaking her head and saying she couldn't un-

derstand how Jim could say such a thing about her.

"It is strange," I said. "I never saw Jim involve himself in such an obvious lie before."

"I don't know," she said.

She looked away. "I didn't murder him," she said, softly.

"I know," I said.

"You didn't know it before," she said. "You believed what he said."

"It came as such a shock," I said. "Think of how you'd feel if, out of a clear blue sky, someone told you I'd murdered my mother or my wife."

"I'd check before I believed."

"What would you think if I told you I was divorced, made you think my wife was still alive?"

She didn't answer.

"Let's forget about it," I said, leaning over to kiss her cheek. "I have missed you," I said.

"But you stayed away."

I couldn't answer. I just felt rage at Jim for lying so blatantly to me. At myself for believing him.

It was around that time that I noticed Albert.

He was looking out of his window at Peggy. I forgot to mention it but Peggy only had on shorts and a tight halter.

I called it to Peggy's attention. Her mouth grew hard again.

"Oh." She bit her lip. "I have to get out of here," she said. "Do you think I could find an apartment—or something?"

"Has he—tried anything?"

"No. Not with his wife around. But I'm afraid."

"We'd better get you out of here."

"And he pretends to be so pious," she said angrily, "just like all men. Pretending to be moral when all the time they're just pigs."

I didn't want to get started on that again. Besides, I thought, she was probably right in Albert's case.

Albert turned away from the window when I made it obvious from my look that I felt a severe desire to plant my foot in his pudgy face.

"You sure he hasn't tried anything?" I said.

"No," she answered, "but I know he'd—like to. The other day Mrs. Grady called me to the phone. I had on my shortie nightgown. I was too sleepy to think about putting on my robe. And Albert came out in the hall and saw me."

She shuddered.

"The way he looked at me

made me sick," she said. "Like—like an *animal*."

"I'd like to break his neck."

"I don't want any more trouble," Peggy said. "I'll just leave."

"Trouble?" I asked. And, sometimes, wished I'd cultivated a deceiving voice like Jim's. Too often, practically always, my voice is a mirror of my feelings.

She looked at me dispassionately.

"You're still thinking about it, aren't you?" she said.

"About what?" I pretended.

"You're thinking about what Jim told you."

I must have looked flustered.

"I'll tell you what I mean," she said. "Maybe you'll be sorry I told you."

Her sensitive face was cold, hurt.

"When I was eight years old," she told me, "I was attacked by a boy. He was seventeen. He dragged me in a closet."

She swallowed and avoided my eyes.

"When my father found out," she said, "he tried to kill the boy."

I reached for her hand instinctively but she drew back.

Peggy, Peggy.

"I can't help the way I feel," she said, "about men. It's in my

flesh. If you weren't—if you hadn't been so different, I'd have run from you too."

"And Jim—?"

"Jim took care of me," she said. "He was always good to me. And he never asked anything in return."

We sat there in silence awhile. Finally our eyes met. We looked at each other. I smiled. She tried to smile but it didn't work.

"Be nice to me, Davie," she said. "Don't be suspicious."

"I won't," I promised. "Peggy, I won't."

Then I said, as cheerfully as possible, "Come on, let's find you an apartment."

I FOUND a car that same day at a used-car lot, and afterwards we found a place for Peggy.

It was a small place. Two rooms, bath and kitchenette for \$55.

It wasn't going to be empty for about two days so we went back to her old place. I invited her out to dinner, then to a show or maybe down to the amusement pier at Venice. She accepted happily.

"Let's start all over," she said impulsively during the afternoon.

"Let's forget the past. It doesn't matter now, does it?"

I hugged her. "No, baby," I said, "of course it doesn't."

When we went in the house Albert and his wife were sitting there in the front room. That they'd been arguing was obvious from the forced way they broke off conversation. There were splashes of red up Albert's white cheeks.

They looked up at us. The old, sullen resentment in Albert's expression. The prissy, forced amiability in Mrs. Grady's atrocious face.

"Mrs. Grady," Peggy said, "I expect to be moving out in two days."

"Oh?" said Mrs. Grady. With that tone that can only be attained by landladies about to lose a tenant.

Albert looked at her. I felt myself tighten in anger. The look on his face made me want to drive my fist against it.

"Is there something wrong here?" Mrs. Grady asked, a trifle peevishly. "Perhaps—"

"No, no," Peggy said, "it's fine. I just want an apartment, that's all."

"Well," said Mrs. Grady. "Well."

"I just happened to stumble

across it today," Peggy said, "or else I would have given you more notice."

"I'm sure," Albert said, his fat lips pursed irritably.

More tightening in me. Peggy moved for her room.

"Excuse me," she said.

I followed without thinking.

"Gratitude," Albert said. And when I was going into her room he said something else. Something about little trash.

I felt myself lurching to a halt. I threw a glance over my shoulder. Then I felt Peggy's restraining hand on my arm.

In her room she looked at me.

"I guess you should have waited outside," she said.

"What's the difference?" I said loud for all to hear. "Change your clothes and let's get out of here."

She put up a screen and went behind it. I saw her halter and shorts flutter over the top and I tried to avoid thinking of Peggy standing there. I tried to concentrate on my rage at Albert. But your mind is hardly your own when it's distracted by such merciless visions.

She came out in a little while. During which time I sat listening to the angry voices of Mr. and Mrs. Grady, lovable duo. And I

heard the word "trash" used again. Albert wasn't hiding it.

"We'd better go," I said, "or I swear I'm liable to punch that slob in the nose."

Silence outside. I hoped they heard.

"I wish you could leave tonight," I said.

"So do I," she said. And in her voice I heard the mixture of revulsion and contempt and, yes, fear.

They were talking when we went out into the front room again. But they shut up. They looked up at Peggy who wore a light blue cotton dress and had a blue ribbon in her hair.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to refund your money," said Mrs. Grady, revealing the depth of her soul.

"I—" Peggy started.

"She's got no claim to it," Albert snapped bitterly, "no claim 'soever."

"I don't expect it back," Peggy said.

"I'm *sure* you don't." That was Albert.

"Shut your mouth, Albert," I said. Surprised at myself how easily it came.

"Uh!" In unison. Mr. and Mrs. Grady were both outraged at my impertinence.

"Come on," I said and Peggy and I left. Hearing a muffled, "She'll be sorry for this," from Albert as we closed the front door behind us.

"You shouldn't have said that," Peggy said as we got into the car. Then she laughed, and it was nice to hear her laugh again.

"Did you see the look on his face," she said. "It was priceless."

We laughed for three blocks. . . .

I parked the car on one of the streets that lead down to the Venice pier. And we walked down together, hand in hand.

We tried to hit a swinging gong at a shooting gallery. We nibbled on buttered popcorn and threw baseballs at stacked wooden bottles. We went down in the diving bell and watched tiger sharks circle the silent shell holding us, watched rays and heard the man say over and over, "They *fly*, ladies and gentlemen—they *fly*!" We rode the little skooter cars and bumped each other and Peggy laughed and her cheeks were bright with color.

I don't remember everything. I just remember the walking hand in hand, the warm happiness of knowing she was with me.

I remember *Funland*.

It's a strange concession. Nothing really but a big black maze.

You wander through it, down inclines, turning corners, searching for an exit—all in a blackness that's complete and abysmal. This sounds pointless, I guess. Until you take a girl. A lot of loafers hang around there. They wait for unescorted girls to go in.

I don't know what it was that made me nervous from the start. Maybe it was Peggy. She seemed to be driving herself, daring herself not to be afraid. Her laughter was forced and her hand in mine shook and was wet with perspiration. She kept tugging.

"Come on, Davie, let's find our way out."

"What did we come in for?"

"To find our way out."

"Progress," I said.

The place was like a coal mine. I couldn't see a thing. It had a dank, rotting odor too, that place. The smell of uncleaned spaces and water-logged wood and the vague, left-over smell of thousands of phantom bodies who had come in to get out.

And there were sounds. Giggles. Little shrieks of deliberate fright. Or were they deliberate? Peggy's breath was fast, erratic. Her laughter was too breathless.

"Babe, what did we come in here for?" I said.

"Come on, it's fun, it's fun."

"Some fun."

She kept pulling me, and I held on tight moving through the blackness that was filled with clumping and shuffling of feet. And more shrieks and giggles. And the sound of our breathing. Unnaturally loud.

"This is scary," Peggy said, "isn't it?"

We touched walls, bumped down inclines, pressed together in the dark.

"Excuse me," I said. It sounded inane.

"All right," came the phantom reply. In a voice that had more fright than elation in it now.

"How do you get out of here?" I said, trying to get rid of the rising uneasiness in me.

"You just wander and finally you come out," she said.

Silence. Except for feet shuffling and her breathing and my breathing. Shuffling along in the dark. With the rising sense that we weren't alone. I don't mean the other people in the black maze. I mean somebody *with* us.

The next thing I remember, the last thing for a while, was a sudden blinding beam of light behind us. A rushing sound behind me. And me whirling around into the eye-closing light. Then feeling two big hands grab my

throat, strong arms spinning me, now in blackness again. A heavy knee driving into my back, and something hard crashing down on my skull.

And though it was dark, for me it got darker. I felt myself hit the floor and start falling into night.

But not before, on my knees and almost gone, I heard Peggy scream out in mortal terror.

SOMEbody was slapping my face.

I twisted my head away and groaned. Sounds trickled back into my brain. I opened my eyes.

I was still on the pier, half stretched out on the walk, propped up against a wooden fence. A crowd was watching me with that alien and heartless curiosity that crowds have for stretched-out victims of any kind. I heard a voice saying, "It's nothing folks, he just fainted. Don't congregate, please. Don't get the police on me, thank you kindly, I appreciate it. Nothing at all folks, just fainted that's all, he just fainted."

"Peggy!"

I struggled up. The pain in my skull almost put me out again. I fell back on one elbow.

"Take it easy, boy," said the

man with the cigar in his mouth, the loud sport shirt, "just fainted, folks. Don't congregate, please don't congregate."

He looked at me. "How's the head?" he asked.

"Where is she?" I asked. I grabbed his arm, fighting off the dizziness. "She's not still in there, is she?"

"No, no, no, no, nobody's in there now. It's cleared out. Stop yelling please. You want the police to come down?"

"Did you see her leave?" I asked.

"I didn't," said the man, still looking around. "Somebody said they did."

"Alone, was she alone?" I slumped against the fence, dizzily.

"I don't know, I'm not sure. *Please*, folks, don't congregate like this. Be a good egg, folks. Give me a break and don't congregate like this."

I pushed up then and started through the crowd, holding myself tight to keep the pain from knocking me on my face again.

I kept seeing her in there. In pitch blackness. With her fear of men. And someone attacking her in blackness. It would drive her out of her mind.

Then another thought.

Jim.

Steig trailing us. Jumping me. Taking Peggy away. It seemed terribly logical to me then.

I started running up the pier for the car and planning to drive to Jim's place to find her. Strange there seemed no doubt in me that she actually was there. Only in a white rage could I be so certain.

I rushed past endless gaudy concessions, the barker voices shrouding me with blatancy. Then, suddenly, I thought, I'll phone him.

In the airless booth my head started throbbing. I gritted my teeth, panting. I looked up Jim's number, sweat rolling down my face. I called the operator and had the call put through.

His voice, assured, dripping with aplomb: "James Vaughan speaking."

"This is David," I said. "Is—"

"David who?"

"Newton!" I said angrily. "Is Peggy there?"

"Peggy? Why do you ask?"

"*Is she there?*"

"You sound hysterical," he said.

"Did you have me attacked tonight?" I asked furiously, not thinking at all. "Did you have Steig take Peggy?"

"What *are* you talking about?"

I suddenly felt my insides fall-

ing. If it weren't Steig, then who was it?

"Speak up, David. What are you talking about? What's happened to Peggy?"

I hung up. I pushed out of the booth. I walked a few feet. Then I broke into a weaving run again. I felt a wild fear in me.

I moved off the pier and wove up the dark street past bars with tinkling pianos and a mission with a tinkling piano and tone-deaf converts singing for their supper.

"Peggy," I gasped.

And found her in my car.

She was sitting slumped over on the right hand side. The first impression I got was one of stark shock. She was shaking violently. Just staring blankly at the windshield and shaking. She had her right arm pressed over her breasts. The fingers of her left hand in her lap were bent and rigid.

"Peggy!"

I slid in beside her and she snapped her head over. Her stare at me was wild with fear. I put my arm around her shaking shoulders.

"What happened, Peggy?"

No answer. She shook. She looked at me, then at the windshield again. Her pupils were black planets swimming in a

milky universe. I'd never seen eyes so big. Or so terror-stricken.

"Baby, it's *me*. Davie."

She started to bite her lower lip. I could almost feel the rising emotion in her. She literally shook it out of herself.

It suddenly tore from her lips. She threw her hands over her face. Then she drew them away just as suddenly and held them before her eyes in tight claws of blood-drained flesh. She clicked her teeth, clenched them together and tried to hold back the moaning.

But her breath caught. And a body-wracking sob burst from her throat. She dragged her hands across her breasts. And I saw that the front of her dress had been ripped open and one of her brassiere straps had been snapped.

"I'm dirty," she said, "dirty!"

I had to grab her hands to keep her from ripping open her own flesh. I was amazed at the strength in her arms and wrists. Impelled by savage shock she was almost as strong as a man, it seemed.

"Stop it! Peggy, stop it!"

Some people stopped and watched with callous curiosity while Peggy shook and groaned, and tried to claw herself.

"Peggy, please, please . . ."

I wanted to start the car and

get away from those staring people. But I couldn't let her tear at her own flesh.

A long shuddering breath filled her. And she started to cry. Heart-broken crying, without strength or hope. I held her against me and stroked her hair.

"All right, baby," I said, "cry, cry."

"Dirty," she moaned, "I'm dirty."

"No," I said. "No, you're not."

"I'm dirty," she said, "dirty."

As soon as I could I started the car and drove away from the curious people. I drove along the ocean for a while and then stopped at a drive-in. By that time she'd stopped crying and was sitting quietly, way on the other end of the seat, staring at her hands.

I'd put my jacket over her to cover the torn dress and slip. I ordered coffee and made her drink it. She coughed on it but she drank it.

It seemed to calm her a little. I stayed away from her. She wanted it that way, I knew. She almost pushed against the other door, crouching as if prepared to leap out should I make the remotest suggestion of an advance.

"Tell me what happened, Peggy?"

She shook her head.

"It'll help you if you can tell me."

Finally she did. And the visualization of what she said made me shiver.

"Someone grabbed me," she said. "I screamed for you but—but you didn't answer."

"I was unconscious, Peggy."

For the first time she looked at me with something besides fear.

"You were hit?" she asked.

I bent over and told her to touch the dried blood on my head.

"Oh," she said in momentary concern, "Davie—"

Then she drew back.

"Go on," I said.

"Some . . . some *man* put his hands on me. He tore at my dress. I scratched him. I think I must have scratched his eyes out. Oh, God, I hope I did. I hope he's *blind!*"

"Peggy, stop."

I saw the look of revulsion on her face. Because she had suddenly picked up her hands to look at them.

She made a gagging sound. Then she started rubbing her fingers over her skirt. I saw what it was.

Skin under her nails. The skin of the man in the black maze.

I got a pen knife from the glove compartment and cleaned her nails while she kept her head turned away, her eyes tightly shut. Her hands trembled in mine.

"I think I'm—going to be sick," she said.

I felt sick myself, flicking those particles of someone's skin on the floor. Someone who had terrorized the girl I loved. It was almost as if he were present with us. I thought vaguely of taking those particles to the police but then I just let them fall. I couldn't stand putting them in an envelope.

"Peggy," I said, "do you think it was Steig?"

She couldn't speak for a moment. Then she said she didn't know.

"If I'd had a gun," she said, "a knife, a razor, *anything*. I'd have—"

I felt the muscles of my stomach tighten. Until I told myself that she'd been driven half mad with fear. And I pushed away the thought I was trying so hard to avoid. And came up with another one that had preyed on me since I was conscious again.

"Peggy."

"What?"

"Did he—?"

She closed her eyes.

"If he had," she said, "you wouldn't have found me here. I'd be in the ocean."

My stomach kept throbbing as I drove up Wilshire. The thought of her being alone after this experience distressed me terribly. Worse than alone, alone with Albert. What if he made an advance this night?

And then I thought, what if it were Albert who had attacked her in the first place?"

I didn't know how to put the thought to her. I didn't want to alarm her needlessly. She seemed set on going back to her room. If I made the idea horrible, and she went anyway. . . .

Thoughts. No end to them. And no resolution.

As I turned up 26th I saw Albert's Dodge in front of the house. And another car too. Jim's Cadillac.

I pulled up to the curb. Jim got out of his car and came quickly over to mine. He opened the door on Peggy's side.

"What is it, Peggy?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Come here," he said.

By the time I got out of the car, he'd led her to his Cadillac and tried to make her get in it.

"I don't want to go!" I heard her say, her voice edging on hysteria again.

"Stop it, Peggy," Jim said. "I just want to talk to you."

Then she was in. And I came up to the car. I looked in and saw their dark forms. I heard Jim's muffled voice.

Steig got out of the car and walked around to where I stood.

"This is private," he said. Guttural. Thick German accent.

"Miss Lister is—" I started to say and found that one of his beefy hands had clamped on my arm. The strength of his grip pressed pain into the flesh.

"Let go of me," I said, gasping.

"You go," he said.

He firmly led me to my car. I couldn't do a thing. He was too big, too strong.

"Get out," Steig said.

My fingers shook as I slid the ignition key in. They shook on the gear shift. My legs trembled on the clutch and the accelerator. My heart pounded violently as I pulled up the street, afraid to look back.

I got out.

I JOLTED up on the bed with a gasp. There was a dark figure standing over the bed.

I threw up one arm to ward off the expected blow.

"Davie, what is it?"

"I said, 'You startled me, I guess.'"

"Oh. I'm . . . sorry. It's Albert," she said quietly.

"What . . . ?"

Then the light was on. She was over at the sink. She pressed a wet cloth on my skull. To my surprise I saw her wearing a different outfit. She had a dark pair of slacks on and a tight black turtleneck sweater. She'd taken a shower too. I could tell from the fresh smell of her, from the dampness on the lower part of her hair where it had come out of the shower cap. Her only makeup was a little lipstick.

She looked very calm.

"What about him?" I said.

"When I went in the house tonight," she said.

"Yes?"

"I—I went to brush my teeth and I met Albert in the hall."

She paused.

"Well . . . ?" I asked.

"His face was all scraped off," she said.

"Albert," I said.

She turned the cloth over with her gentle, unshaking fingers.

"What did you do?" I asked.

She stroked my hair gently. "I left," she said.

"You took a shower first?"

"No," she said, "I took that before. It was after the shower that I met Albert in the hall."

"You came right here?"

"I stopped to call Jim."

"He didn't stay with you?" I asked, inanely.

She looked slightly surprised. "Of course he didn't," she said, "he just wanted to find out what had happened tonight. He said you called him."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I thought maybe you were at his house."

We drove back to her place in the morning. I'd told her about Steig roughing me.

"Well, I'll just *tell* Jim," she was saying. "He'll get rid of Steig if I tell him."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course, Davie," she said, "you're his friend, aren't you?"

"I doubt it."

Then I said, "I still think you should move out today. Stay with me one more night. But, my God,

don't spend another night there with Albert."

"I won't," she said.

She shook her head then. And her throat moved nervously.

"We'll just pick up your things," I said. "You don't even have to go in the house."

As we drove up to the house and I parked behind the Dodge Peggy's face got suddenly pale.

"Baby, it's all right," I said.

I got out. She got out too.

"Baby, stay here," I said. "You don't have to go in."

"No," she said, "I'll come in."

"Well—all right."

We went up the walk together. I felt in myself that if Albert were there and he said a word to me, I'd knock him down and step on his face.

The front door was open. We went into the living room.

"Is Mrs. Grady home?" I whispered.

"I guess so," she said.

We went into the hall. She went into her room and I followed. Then as she turned to close the door I heard her voice sink to a whisper.

"*Davie. . . .*"

I looked in the direction she was looking. Down at where Albert's room was. My heart jumped.

There was a body sprawled on the floor.

I broke into a run and pushed open the half-open door. I heard Peggy behind me.

Mrs. Grady was crumpled on the floor. Her white face was pointed at the ceiling. In her right hand she clutched something. I couldn't see what it was but the tip was red . . .

Then my eyes moved suddenly to the bed.

Albert was there. He was staring at us, his eyes were wide open.

Albert was no more. And that was when I recognized the instrument in Mrs. Grady's hand.

An icepick.

It had been driven into Albert's brain.

3

LIEUTENANT JONES, Homicide, was a broad man with horn-rimmed glasses. His mood was surly.

Mrs. Grady was giving her version of what had happened.

"I went in to call him for breakfast," she said. "I found him in there with that—that *thing* in his . . . *oh!*"

"Why did you take it out?"

She shook her head. Then suddenly she twisted her head and

pointed a shaky finger at Peggy.

"*She* did it!" she said wildly.

"I know it, I *know* she did it!"

I sat beside Peggy on the big flowered couch, afraid to look at her.

"That will do," Jones said.

"*Do!* My husband is dead. He's killed! Do you understand that? Are you going to let her get away with it?"

"I know he was killed, Mrs. Grady," Jones said. "We're trying to find out who did it as soon as possible. If you'll just help us and not throw around accusations."

I sat there numbly staring at him. Listening to the murmur of voices in Albert's room, the muffled pop of flash bulbs, the shuffling of feet.

I kept visualizing Albert lying in there, the icepick hole in his head—and the other. It was almost unbearable to think about the other. Whoever had driven the icepick into Albert's brain had also taken Albert's straight razor and made an enormous bloody slit around Albert's neck. It was long, nearly the whole circumference of the neck. And it was deep. *It was almost as if. . . .*

As if—and I wanted to be sick.

"Miss Lister?" Jones said.

"Y-yes?"

"You were out last night?"

"Yes."

"What's that you said about having trouble with him?"

The way he spoke made me start. As if he were trying to rip away all incidentals and get to the core of everything.

"He was—" Peggy started. She lowered her eyes. "He—"

"Albert tried to attack her last night," I said.

"Lies, lies!" cried Mrs. Grady. "He was a dear, clean man, a dear, clean man."

"You'll have to stop this," Jones said to her, "or I'll have to ask you to leave this room."

She slumped back in silence again, blubbering helplessly, her toothpick shoulders twitching with violent sobs.

I was sitting there suddenly wishing I'd kept my mouth shut. Because all I could think was that I'd given Peggy a perfect motive.

Jones looked at Peggy.

"Is this true?" he said.

She tried to answer but couldn't. She nodded her head once, jerkily.

Jones looked back at me. "Well," he said, "what about it?"

I told him about the scrapes on Albert's face. I told him about *Funland* and the attack on me and Peggy. My words were punc-

tuated by moans and muffled denials from Mrs. Grady. I didn't know whether she really doubted me or not. After all, I kept thinking, the icepick had been in her hand. And she certainly had a motive.

"Did you see him?" Jones asked.

"You mean last night?"

"I mean last night."

"No, I—"

"Why not?"

"It was pitch black."

"I see," Jones said. But he really said, in effect, thirty days, next case. It occurred to me that he might even think I did it. The jealous lover. I lowered my eyes.

Jones worked on Peggy again. "You two were together then?" he said.

She swallowed. "Yes."

"And you went to—" Jones consulted the pad in his hand, "to Newton's apartment later."

Peggy looked flustered. "I—"

"What time did you go there?"

"She came to my room about —" I started.

"Will you kindly let Miss—" He consulted the pad again. "Miss Lister answer her own questions?"

"About two," Peggy said.

"Why did you go there?" Jones asked.

"Because I saw the scrapes on Albert's face. I didn't want to—"

"Lies . . . lies!" Mrs. Grady again. "*Murderess!*"

Her voice broke off with a choking gasp as two men carried a stretcher into the room, a blancketed body on it.

"Couldn't you go the back way?" Jones asked sharply.

"Alley's too narrow," said a bored cop.

Mrs. Grady was up. Her face was strained and wild. "I'm going with him," she said, "I'm going with my darling."

"That won't do any good," Jones said quietly.

"I'm going, I tell you." Her voice was cracked, her eyes almost glittered.

Jones let her go. He said a few words to one of the cops. While he was talking, I turned to Peggy. "Don't tell him how you feel about men," I whispered.

"What?"

I glanced at Jones. "I said," I whispered out of the side of my mouth, "don't tell this man how you feel about men. It would only—"

She was looking at me curiously.

"What were you saying to her?" Jones asked me.

"Nothing," I said instinctively.

Jones looked at me coldly. "No talking," he said. Then he sat down as the door shut behind Mrs. Grady and her dead husband.

"How sure are you that the dead man is the one who tried to attack you?" Jones asked Peggy.

"I know how I scratched the face of the man who— And Albert had scratches all over his face too. You saw him."

"I know," Jones said, "did you see anyone else last night?"

"My—lawyer," Peggy said.

"When?"



"When—when we came home from Venice."

"You told him about the attack?"

"Yes."

"Did you suspect the dead man of being the one who had attacked you at the time you were speaking to your lawyer?"

"Not then. I told him later that it was Mr. Grady who had done it."

"You saw him later?"

"I called him before I went to—to Mr. Newton's room." Her eyes were lowered in embarrassment.

Mr. Newton, I thought. Murder, the strange impersonalizer.

Then the doorbell rang. Jones got up and opened it.

Jim. He came in and talked to Jones for a few minutes, and then Peggy went to the station with Jones and Jim. I wasn't invited. As they got into the police car Jim told Steig to follow them.

I tried to catch Peggy's eye as the police car moved away from the curb. But she avoided my look. I guessed because I'd as much as told her I suspected her.

I watched the two cars go down the street. And I felt sick and empty. . . .

That afternoon, back at my room, I was trying to nap when I heard footsteps on the porch and, looking out the window, saw that it was Jim.

"Come in," I said when he knocked. He came in and the first thing I asked him was how Peggy was.

"As well as can be expected," he said, always cryptic.

"What the hell does that mean?"

He took his hat off and looked at me dispassionately.

"If you're going to tell me that Peggy killed Albert, save your breath. I know she didn't," I said.

"And how do you know?"

"I—I know."

"Hardly a legal defense, David," he said. "You always did think with your voice."

"And you," I said, "always did destroy what stood in your way."

A flicker. Gone then. He sighed.

"What's the use?" he said. He reached into his inside jacket pocket and drew out a rich leather bill-fold.

He was holding something out to me.

"Well, take it," he said. He paused for effect. "Are you afraid?"

I reached out a visibly shaking hand and took it.

"Read it."

The clipping was five years old. San Francisco dateline. Picture of a man I'd never seen. And next to him a picture of Peggy.

The headline:

G.I. Student Stabbed

Pregnant Wife Confesses

WHEN Jim made his exultant exit, I rushed to my car and drove at near violation speed up Wil-

shire. And going in the front door without knocking. Pretending to ignore the shudder I got going back into that house.

She was packing, her face very sad.

"Peggy."

She kept packing after she looked at me. She moved around the room, her motions crisp and tight. I watched her for a moment. And I just couldn't for the life of me, visualize murder in those hands.

I went in and sat on the bed by the suitcase. "Peggy."

No answer.

"I want to tell you why I didn't come back this afternoon."

"It doesn't matter."

"Doesn't it?"

"No."

"I saw Jim this afternoon."

"I see." Coldly. As if she were a woman who didn't care for anything in the world. Instead of a shy, timorous girl afraid of the world and its multiple terrors.

I reached out and grabbed her wrist. She didn't honor me with a struggle. She just stared straight ahead.

"He showed me a newspaper clipping, Peggy," I told her.

Her eyes moved down at me.

"It was the story of how you killed your husband," I said.

She shuddered and her wrist went limp.

"Jim also told me you were living on his money and not on alimony," I said.

I wanted desperately for her to snap out angry words at me and make me know they were all lies. But she couldn't. She didn't speak. Then she said, softly:

"Let me go."

"When you tell me why you lied to me. About so many things."

"I didn't want to tell you," she said.

"Why?"

She bit her lower lip and kept her face averted.

"Peggy, I want some truth! Do you hear me?"

She cut off a sob.

"What sort of a girl are you," I said, "who can speak of love and yet lie incessantly to the person you say you love? What kind of selfish girl are—"

"Selfish!"

She jerked away her hand violently.

"Selfish!" she said, "yes, I'm selfish! Very selfish! I was brought up by a father who hated me. Who did everything he could to make my life miserable. I was shuttled around from city to city, never having a home. Only hotels

and motels and dingy little apartment houses near naval bases. I had boys try to attack me. I had older men try to proposition me. And to top it all off I married an animal who dragged me through poverty and gave me nothing but filth in return. Filth, do *you* hear! A man who made me pregnant, then tried to force me to get an abortion! A man who had no regard for me. I was a piece of flesh to him. And I killed him and I'd kill him again for the things he did to me! I—I lost my baby in a miscarriage." Peggy gulped, then said, "And now— when I find something good for the first time—when I try to hold on to the only beautiful thing I ever had in my whole life . . . you call me *selfish*! Yes! I'm s-s-selfish!"

Her back was turned from me. She shook violently, crying and trying not to cry. But unable to keep all the pent misery of years from flooding out.

I got up quietly. I stood behind her. I put my hands up to hold her shoulders. Then I drew them back. I didn't know. I felt terribly contrite. Everything seemed to fall into a pattern. Jim had colored an already ugly picture with even uglier hues. For his own purpose.

She cried for a long time. We

sat on the bed and I kept drying her eyes with my handkerchief. Later, I asked:

"And the money?"

"Money?"

"Jim's."

She looked at me unhappily. "Why—what's wrong with that? If he wants to give it to me?"

"Baby, you're being kept!"

"He never *touched* me, Davie."

"It's the idea, Peggy."

She looked at me, a little frightened.

"Peg?"

"Yes, darling?"

"Did you—?"

"What?"

I didn't speak. Finally, I said, "If you did it, Peg, I'll understand, and I'll stick by you. I'll—"

"Love my memory?" she said.

"No, I—"

"I didn't kill Albert," she said.

I grabbed at it. I clung to it and it was like a tonic, the first moment of limp ease after a raging fever has abated.

"I believe you," I said. . . .

We moved her into the new place that afternoon, and I tried to get her to tell the police about Jim. But she refused with her little girl logic. Then I suggested that at least we ought to confront Jim himself with his lies, and she

refused to do that, too. It wasn't loyal, she said.

So I went alone to see Jim. I didn't find him, but I did find somebody else.

Audrey.

Audrey flung her arms around my neck. She had a silk pair of lounging pajamas on. Black and sheer and nothing else. I could feel the softness of her mold against me.

"Give us a kiss, Dave."

Her soft lips pressed against mine. And I got a sense of tension in her. The way she clung to me. It wasn't right.

Suspicion vindicated by the distinct odor of whiskey on her breath.

That was a shock. Audrey had never drunk at college. She'd just follow Jim around, a disciple to his calloused presence. Treasuring the few scraps of affection he gave her.

"Gee, Dave, it's good to see you," she said.

"It's good to see you too, Audrey."

She drew back, her small hands still gripping my shoulders.

"Let me see," she said. "Oh, yes. You're heavier. Affluence? Or beer?"

I chuckled and leaned over to kiss her cheek.

"Audrey, Audrey," I said, "what transmutation is this? I remember saddle shoes and bright-eyed naiveté. Now I find a new hairdo, sexy pajamas and—well—"

"And liquor?" she said.

I tried to slough it off.

"Come on in," she said, "come on in and talk to me. I'm lonely."

"Is Jim home?" I asked as she led me into the livingroom, big and empty now.

"He's on business," she said.

I got that too. Too chipper, too much a toss-off. She had found the phrase too easy. And from it I knew there'd been a lot of nights when Audrey had stayed home while Jim went out on "business." The old American synonym for cheating. Yes, it all added up. College had been the preamble.

I sat down, and Audrey got a couple of drinks. Big ones, and straight. She drained hers swiftly and filled her glass again.

We talked for a long while. It wasn't too pleasant.

"Sometimes I could scream," she said later on.

I thought of Peggy. "Sometimes I could, too," I said.

Then I stood up, "I'd better go," I said. Before I forget myself, I didn't add. I went over to her.

"Goodbye, Aud—"

I stopped when she looked me in the eye. Her breath was tortured. It shook her body. Something seemed to be bubbling up in her.

"*I could scream,*" she said.

"Scream," I said.

Suddenly she grabbed my arms and pressed her open mouth against my chest. I heard the muffled sound of her screaming at the top of her lungs into my flesh. It lasted until her breath went. Then she raised her darkly flushed face and looked at me, gasping.

"There," she said, hardly able to speak. "Mostly it's a pillow. Thanks for the nice cushion."

She turned away. I followed her from the room. We stood together by the front door.

"Will you give me a goodbye kiss?" she asked.

She raised on her toes and slid her arms around my neck. She brushed her warm lips over mine. Then she smiled and stroked my cheek.

"You're sweet," she said. "I wish—" She shrugged. "Oh, what's the difference, anyway?"

"Goodbye, Audrey."

"Goodbye, dear."

I went out the door and down

to my car. I got in and sat there a long time staring at the windshield, wishing I'd stayed with Peggy.

Then, as I stepped on the starter, light streamed across the porch and leaped on the car.

"Dave!"

I looked over and saw Audrey come running across the porch and down the steps. She had on a long black raincoat with a hood over her head. I saw a maid at the door watching her go. Then the maid shrugged, and shut the door.

Audrey ran around the car, opened the door and slid in.

"How about giving a gal a ride into town?"

"All right," I said, caught off guard.

Back on Pacific Coast Highway I asked her where she was going.

"Santa Monica," she said.

"You're not quite dressed for evening activity," I said.

"Nobody will notice," she said, "where I'm going."

"Where's that?"

"Just drop me off downtown," she parried. "I'm not going any place in particular. I'll probably go to a movie."

"Oh."

I drove in silence a while.

Audrey sat staring out at the ribbon of road unraveling under my headlights. Her face was expressionless.

"You can let me off here," Audrey said at Wilshire and 3rd.

"I'll take you downtown," I said.

"You don't have to."

I slowed down at Santa Monica Boulevard and 3rd.

"This is fine," Audrey said.

I kept moving. Down to Broadway. I stopped the car and she turned to look at me.

"I'm not clever, am I?" she said.

Broadway is where all the bars are.

"Come with me," I said. "Meet my girl."

"Oh, you have a girl?"

"Come on. Shut the door."

"No."

"You'll like Peggy," I said.

And from the look on her face I suddenly realized that it was Audrey's husband who wanted to marry Peggy. And I knew that, contrary to Jim, Audrey didn't "understand" it.

Audrey shuddered and pushed out of the car.

"Bye," she said hurriedly and slammed the door.

"Audrey—"

SHE was already turning the corner. I started the car and pulled around. I saw her going into The Bamboo Grill.

I drove to Peggy's and found the note on the door.

Davie: Jim came. He said we had to discuss my legal case. I told him I was waiting for you but he said it's very important. After all, Davie, I have to have a lawyer and I don't know anyone else and he doesn't charge me. I'm sorry but I think I should go. Please call me in the morning. Peg.

Legal case. Fat chance that's what they were discussing. He was pouring more lies into her. I was burned up. I'd told her I was coming right back. She might have waited. After all the tension we'd had between each other—and now this.

I stood beside my car, glowering, wanting to hit back. I was sick of it all. I wanted to write a note telling her it was all over. Something that would hurt. But I knew I had no right to do that.

I didn't want to go home, though.

Audrey. Downtown, alone, my old pal Audrey.

I got into my car and drove back to The Bamboo Grill. She wasn't there, and she wasn't in

the next four bars I tried, either. But I had a drink in each of them.

In the fifth bar, I decided to hell with it. I grabbed a booth and ordered another bourbon and water. I drank half of it. And then she appeared. From the cosmos. From the universe. From the ladies' room.

And, even slightly potted and disarrayed, Audrey was out of place there.

She almost passed my table.

"Buy you a drink, girly?" I said.

She turned to cut me off, then smiled as she saw me.

"Davie!"

She slid in across from me. She still had on the raincoat.

"Where did you come from?" she asked.

"From the cosmos, from the universe," I said.

"I came from the john."

"Won't you allow me to purchase you a magnum of Chantilly?"

"That's lace, isn't it?"

"Who knows? Let us be gay. If it's lace we'll drink it anyway."

We drank a lot. The time seemed to pass. And I found myself sitting beside her instead of across from her. The strong sensation of drunkenness on me. The

loss of balance. The sense that you're hyperbrilliant, that your brain, though cased in numbing wool, is glittering like a jewel.

And, around midnight, I remember putting my mouth on hers. And feeling all the animal heat in me dredging up. And not caring. She made no attempt to stop my touching her.

Somehow we were in the car, driving up Broadway. Then over to Wilshire on Lincoln. I remember that. We parked. We were out of the car and into my room. In the darkness, weaving as in a dream. I took off her raincoat, letting all the things I believed in be washed away by the tides of the coarse desire flooding through me.

It was dark. She was in the cool darkness, waiting for me.

And then a car came past the house in the alley, slowly moving out. And the light played on Audrey's face.

In the light I saw her face. It was blank. That headlight was like a spotlight of revelation on those expressionless features.

Her cheeks were shimmering with tears.

"Audrey."

My voice was broken. Something cold billowed up in my body, freezing everything as vio-

lently as it had come. I stood there, trembling.

Then I went over, reached down and pulled the blankets over her. Without a word, I bent over and kissed her forehead.

I was afraid to say anything. I was about to straighten up when she put her arms around my neck.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, "I tried to believe it was right. But. . . ."

I almost fell out of the chair in shock when the knocking came on the door. A loud knocking, hard.

I leaped up, wincing at the stiffness in my back and neck. My heart was pounding. My head ached a little.

Suddenly I remembered Audrey with a gasp. My eyes ran over to the dark outline of her.

I didn't know what to do. I just stood there shivering, staring stupidly at the bed, then at the door. I felt myself jump as Audrey stirred restlessly. She moaned a little and turned on her side. I think I was paralyzed. All I could do was visualize Peggy standing out there. My claims of innocence would mean nothing to her.

I started for the door.

"What is it?" Audrey asked in sleepy fright. She was propped up on one elbow.

"Shhh!" I said anxiously.

Then I leaped back as the door was shoved open violently and I saw a figure in the doorway, lit by the hall light. A tall figure, square, powerful.

Steig.

He came in and flicked on the light switch.

I don't know what I felt in those first moments. Shame, fear, anger. But I exploded in his face.

"Get out of here!" I yelled.

My words were hacked off as Steig drove a violent right into my stomach which doubled me over.

All the night seemed to flood in on me. I was bent over, gasping for air. The floor ran like water to my eyes.

Another blow on the side of my head. Like a cast iron mallet it felt. It drove me into the table and sent me and the whole business crashing over onto the floor.

"Stop it!" Audrey screamed, "stop it, Steig!"

I was dragged up. Then a rock exploded in my face and I felt hot blood spurting out of my nose and sharp pain in my head.

"You stay off!" Steig snarled. "Stay off!"

I think he might have beaten me to death if Audrey hadn't jumped up and grabbed his arm.

She was Vaughan's wife, Mr. Vaughan's wife. He couldn't afford to harm her.

He had to let me go. His way of letting go was shoving me across the room. I crashed into the partition that separated the room from the kitchenette. Then I slid down and crumpled into a heap on the rug.

"Let me go!" I heard Audrey screaming.

I couldn't help. I was gone. Falling through a black pit that hurt. And hurt. And hurt.

4

I FELT lousy for a couple of days after that.

I drove to Peggy's. She was inside. So was Dennis. And another miserable afternoon began. Dennis was in a nasty mood and he made it plain that he was after Peggy and that he didn't want me seeing her any more. That led to one thing and another and, finally, a brawl. I took out on Dennis all the anger Steig had built up inside me, and when the fight was over, Dennis was battered and bloody.

While he was picking himself up off the floor, Peggy announced that she thought it would be "nice" if I drove Dennis home.

Very nice.

I drove Dennis home.

The next day, Peggy came and told me that Jim wanted to take us to dinner and to a concert at the Bowl.

Us?

Sure, she said. Us. Peggy and me.

"I'm sure the three of us will love it," I said. . . .

One of the first things Jim said at dinner was, "David, I want to apologize quite sincerely for the terrible mistake Steig made the other night. I guess he jumped to conclusions that were unwarranted."

He shrugged like the genial apologizer he wasn't.

"Steig has been disciplined," Jim said like a stern schoolmaster.

"What did you do," I asked, "take away his pet spiders?"

He smiled. Perfect combination smile. Clever admixture of amusement and aloofness. A look that said to Peggy—there, you see, my dear, I told you that this lout was beyond all appeal to decent behavior.

I drank heavily at dinner. I don't know what was the matter with me. I guess I'm spoiled. I just wouldn't take that evening straight. I couldn't beat Jim in

The Frigid Flame

his own territory at a game he made the rules for. I felt clamped and a hapless jerk from the start.

As a result I just drank and sniped like a kid all night.

At the Bowl, I further distinguished myself by falling over a seat.

Afterwards we went to the Mocambo. All I remember is people laughing and cigarette smoke and dancing once with Peggy and her not looking me in the eye.

I drank. The room spun around me. I didn't taste the drinks any more. They were just containers of liquid. And Peggy drank some and so did Jim.

Then we were up again. Large denomination bills fluttering out of Jim's wallet like flocks from a sanctuary. And me, God help me, staggering, almost falling. Jim's hand at my elbow, guiding.

"Let's go!" Me, rambunctious. The tough guy. Sing me an old refrain. "*Oh what an ass was Davie!*"

Out in the street. The reaction at last. Sudden quietude in me. A desire to be rid of everyone and everything for good.

"Good night," I said, casually and walked away from them as Jim was helping her into the car.

"*Davie.*"

Her voice was more irritated than concerned. I paid no attention. I walked quickly up Sunset. The wrong way, I later discovered.

They didn't follow. I suppose Jim talked her out of it. She was just angry enough to let him.

I don't know how long I wandered. The night went on and on and so did I. Everything whirled around, it was just dumb luck I wasn't flattened by a car. I bumped into a couple of people who looked mildly revolted. I tried to get into somebody else's 1940 Ford which I thought was mine.

I don't remember everything. But I remember sitting in a diner and drinking coffee and discussing religion with the cook. I remember sitting on a curb and petting a very patient collie dog who must have been repelled by my breath and my soporific mumbling. I remember lying on my back on somebody's lawn and looking up at the stars and singing a soft version of *Nagasaki* to myself with lyric variations pertaining to the atom bomb.

Then, finally, in some erratic fashion I found my way down to Wilshire Boulevard and got myself on a red bus. I rode down to Western and picked up my car

where I'd left it. I drove back to the room.

Key in door lock. Opening of door. Drunken weaving to lamp, turning on of lamp.

Breath sucked out. An icy hand crushing my heart.

On my bed, Dennis.

In his brain, an icepick.

5

I DON'T know how long I stood there looking at him. Then I stared at my shaking hands, and I was as sober as a judge.

Dennis dead.

Who? The thought finally managed to emanate after the initial shock had faded a little. Who had done this? Another icepick.

Peggy was out with Jim. But how long had Peggy been home? I jumped up and ran out of the room. I got into my car and started the motor.

Then I stopped it and ran back in again. I tried not to look at those glassy, staring eyes and that great patch of blood on my pillow. I drew the light blue bedspread over his body, his face. Then I turned out the light and went into the hall and back to my car.

A mistake. But who ever makes

the right move when he's all twisted inside?

I turned off at 15th, and drove down to Peggy's. I saw a light in her livingroom as I ran across the lawn.

She was alone, sitting in her bathrobe reading a book. I forgot about the night that had gone before. All I could think of was Dennis.

I knocked.

"Baby, how long have you been here?" I asked hurriedly as she opened the door.

"What do you—?"

"Peggy, how long?" I asked, grabbing her shoulders.

She jerked back and her right hand slapped against my cheek.

"Get your hands off me!" she said angrily.

She stood there trembling, her chest rising and falling with sharp breaths.

"Dennis is in my room," I said.

"What has that got to do—"

"He's dead," I said.

She stared at me. "What did you say?"

"He has an icepick in his head," I said slowly and watched the look come over her face. A lost look. Her mouth fell open. She stepped back and bumped against the couch. She sank down on it and looked at the far wall.

"He's—?"

I didn't say anything.

"Dennis?"

"Yes, Dennis," I said, "how long have you been home?"

"I—I don't know. A few hours, I guess."

"Think!"

"It was—I remember looking at my watch. We were—just turning the corner at Wilshire, I think. Yes, we—"

"What time?"

"Twelve thirty-five. No, twelve forty-five."

I looked at my watch. It was past four.

"Did Jim stay here?" I asked.

"For a while," she said.

"How long?"

"Oh—twenty minutes."

Then she was in my arms crying. Her fingers held tightly to me.

"Davie, Davie, what's the matter with everything?"

"All right," I said, "I know you didn't do it."

She drew back as if she'd been struck.

"Me!" she said. "You thought I'd killed him!"

She pulled away from me.

"Get out of here," she said.

"Oh, get out of here!"

"Peggy, listen to me."

"No, I won't listen to you," she

said. "I've had enough of you. All you've done is act suspicious and hateful!"

She looked at me angrily, hands clenched.

"Listen, Peggy," I said, "your pride is rather unimportant now. In the past week two men have been murdered. That's a little more important than vanity, isn't it?"

She turned away. "I don't know," she said. "I know I'm tired of everything. I'm tired of it. I'll never find any happiness."

"I'll leave you alone then," I said. "You can go to sleep. But I advise you to call Jim. You'd better find out if he's arranged an alibi for you."

She looked at me but I left. I got in my car and drove back to the room. I was going to walk up to the gas station and call Jones.

I didn't notice the big car as I parked and got out. I didn't notice anything, I was so upset.

But there were two plainclothesmen waiting. And Jones said, "I'm glad you had the sense to come back."

The body was gone. Jones and I were sitting in the room.

"And that's your story," he said.

"Easily checked," I said. "Ask

Peggy Lister. Ask Jim Vaughan. I was with them."

"There's a long time you weren't with them."

"I saw other people then."

"We'll find out about Vaughan first," he said.

"Do you really think I'm lying?"

He shrugged. "The pick is from your drawer," he said.

"Are you—do you actually think I did it?"

He shrugged again. "You'll do for now," he said.

"Are you serious?" I said. "For God's sake, why should I come back here if I did it!"

"Come on."

"I told you I was going to call you!"

"Are you coming?"

"Listen—"

"Let it go, boy," he said. "Get some toilet articles and let's get out of here."

That's how I spent my first night in jail. Lying on a cot in a cell. Staring at the walls. Listening to a drunk singing college songs.

In the morning I was taken to Jones' office.

He sat there working on some papers while I waited nervously. I watched his lean, blue-veined hands shuffling through papers.

I looked at his thin face, the dark eyes.

Finally the eyes were on me.

"So you were with Vaughan," he said.

"That's what I said. Have you spoken to him?"

"Yes," he said, "we have."

"Well—?"

He kept looking at me and not answering and all of a sudden the bottom started dropping out.

"Oh, *no!*" I said.

He looked at me without speaking. He nodded.

"This is crazy!" I said. "You mean that he actually said he *wasn't* with me last night?"

"He actually said that."

"Well, he's lying! Damn it! Isn't that obvious?"

He shook his head.

My hands started to shake.

"Have you asked Peggy?" I said.

"Yes."

It hit me right in the stomach. I felt as if I were going out of my mind.

"Let me get this," I said.

"Peggy said I wasn't with them last night?"

"How long are you going to insist on that?" Jones asked.

"Have you heard of people lying?"

"Yes, I've heard of it," he said, looking at me.

"Peggy," I said, "*Peggy*. To lie about me. I just don't get it. I just—don't."

"Tell me what happened last night," he said.

"I told you."

"Tell me again."

I told him. When I finished, he looked at me studiously.

"That's it, huh?"

"Yes, that's it. I have no reason to lie."

"Except to save your life," he said.

"Listen, Jones," I said, "you're falling right in with that red-headed louse who's trying to shove me around the way he's been shoving people around all his life."

He looked at me a long time until it made me nervous.

"I don't know," he finally said, "whether you're telling the truth or not. I'm inclined to believe you. I don't think you could make up as many verifiable lies on the spur of the moment and then duplicate yourself. *But*—unless either one of those two will change their story, there's not much I can do. Your story *could* be a lie."

I was taken back to my cell.

I spent the morning reading the paper. The story was on the front page. There was no picture

of me, just one of the house, a front view. I knew the landlady wouldn't exactly love me after this. Her house would have a reputation now. . . .

About noon a cop opened my cell door and gestured with his head.

"Get your stuff," he said.

I found Steig out in front. I was going to get irate at first and refuse the bail. I decided otherwise.

As we started down the steps, Steig said, "Mr. Vaughan wants to see you."

"I don't want to see him," I said.

"You go with me," he said, assured.

"Listen, tough man," I said, too burned up to be afraid, "I'm not going with you. If you want to try and make me, go ahead. I'll kick you where it will do the most good."

Then I turned on my heel and walked away.

Steig was too amazed at my violence to move. He just stood there, staring after me. . . .

I FOUND Peggy in her living-room. I went in without knocking. She jumped a little as I entered.

"All right," I said, "let's have it."

She stood up, and I grabbed her wrist.

"Well?"

"You're hurting me!"

"You're hurting *me*, too!" I snapped back. "Does it mean anything to you that I might be executed for murder?"

I've seen confused faces in my time. But the look on Peggy's face had them all beaten.

"But he told me—" she started.

"Who told you? Vaughan? Told you what? That they couldn't pin anything on me?"

"I—yes."

"Well, I'm the only suspect," I said. "Who the hell do you think they're going to suspect—Dracula?"

"I don't understand, Davie—"

"Obviously," I said. "Listen, Peggy, maybe you don't realize what's been going on. There have been two murders, *two* of them!"

"But you didn't—"

"I know it and you know and Jim knows. But if neither of you tells the truth about it, who's going to take *my* word?"

"I—" She ran a hand over her cheek.

"What did he tell you?" I asked. "Come on, let's have it.

Did he actually tell you I wouldn't be involved?"

"Yes. He told me they—couldn't prove a thing against you. So he said we shouldn't get involved. I mean, *I* shouldn't get involved."

"A dead man in my room with an icepick from my kitchen drawer," I said, "and I wouldn't be suspected! Come on Peggy, what's the matter with you? You're so naive, it's near criminal."

"I know. But he—" She shook her head. "He said we shouldn't!"

"And you just—took his word."

"Well—"

"Peggy, when are you going to start using your head?"

She looked up defiantly a moment. Then her shoulders slumped. She lowered her eyes.

"What did he really tell you?" I asked.

Her voice was defeated. "He said he'd re-open my old case. He said I'd be executed for it."

"You can't be tried twice for the same crime!"

"He said—"

"He said, he said! What is he—a Svengali? Haven't you got a brain in your head?"

"He has my life in his hands," she said.

The thought was sickening.

"He has *not*," I said. "He has no control over you. Are you going to set his welfare above mine?"

"Davie—"

"What kind of love do you have for me, anyway?"

"Please, Davie."

"Listen," I said incredulously, "this is serious business."

"I was *afraid*—"

"Afraid," I said. "I'm afraid too, Peggy. Jim said he'd get me one way or the other."

"He wouldn't kill his own brother."

"Jim would kill his own mother if it served his purpose."

"No."

"It serves his purpose to get me out of the way. And he'll do it too, if you keep lying about me."

She looked at me blankly, then nodded once.

"All right," she said quietly. "This afternoon I'll go to Lieutenant Jones and tell him you were with us."

I took an easy breath. They were short and far between those days. I knew I should start worrying about what Jones would do when she changed her story in midstream. A girl who was proven to have murdered once and suspected of having done it again.

"Thank you," I said. "I'll go now."

I was beginning to sense the end of our relationship. I couldn't see how it could last through all this. Even if I loved her. Let's face it. It *isn't* enough when everything else is lacking.

6

I WAS WRONG. Several days after Dennis' funeral, Peggy and I reached an understanding. She agreed to marry me. We were returning to her place after a day hiking in the woods. I had soothed all of her revulsion toward men; even the miserable, horrible fact that years ago her own father had—I brushed the horror from my mind. Now, my love was going to marry me. I had



room for nothing else in my mind.

As Peggy and I entered her place, Jim looked up from the couch. He was dressed informally

in a brown suede jacket with a lightly patterned sport shirt under it.

"I've been looking for you all day, Peg," he said firmly. He didn't even glance at me.

"Jim," I said.

"Will you get dressed as quickly as possible," he said to Peggy. "We're to go to a barbecue at Lamar Brandeis' beach house. We're late already. It's not polite to be late at a producer's party."

I held my temper. The axe would fall on him soon enough. I glanced at Peggy.

"Jim, I—" she started.

"Peggy, I wish you'd hurry."

She took a deep breath.

"I can't, Jim," she said.

His eyebrows drew together and I felt inclined to utter a mocking "Bravo" at this splendid bit of facial business.

Jim was looking at her gravely.

"And why, may I ask?" he said, still ignoring me.

"Jim—I—"

She couldn't finish. She seemed halted by those eyes. Those grey-blue eyes on her, probing, demanding, almost hypnotizing.

"Peggy is staying here," I said.

"No one is speaking to you!"

Anger at last! And anger in Peggy's sight. I almost reveled in it. Something ugly that had been

veiled too long from her eyes. Now at last, revealing itself.

"Listen, you pompous ass," I started.

"Davie," she pleaded. I stopped and her eyes moved over to Jim. Her throat moved. She bit her lip.

"Jim—"

"Well, *what* is it, Peggy?"

"Jim. Davie and I are going to be married." She spoke quietly, half in defiance, half with the still remaining timidity.

Jim Vaughan's body twitched. Something almost gave. Like a great wall about to topple. He stared at her, speechless for the first time I could remember since I'd met him, so many years ago. Someone had finally hit Jim Vaughan where it hurt.

And, suddenly, it came to me that Jim was in the same boat as Peggy and Audrey. And all of us to some degree. He was starving for real love and he'd never received it. And now it was tearing him apart at last because the shell he'd made to hide himself was cracking.

"It's not true," he said.

She nodded once. "Yes. It is."

Something seemed to drain from his body. He pumped it back with will power. He managed a thin smile.

"Oh?" he said. "And have you told him how you murdered Albert? Is he willing to—"

"Your lies won't work anymore," I told him.

"Lies?"

"I know who murdered Albert. And Dennis. I know about your argument with Dennis. I know that he was wild for Peggy and wouldn't listen to your warnings to keep his hands off her. You killed him!"

He turned and walked to the door. There he turned again. He looked at us, his face a stone mask. His eyes settled on me like the benediction of a cobra.

"Then maybe you also know," he said, "how you'll live long enough to marry Peggy."

Peggy gasped.

"Jim! You wouldn't—"

For a moment, Jim's face was stripped of everything. The animal, the hating, frustrated animal showed for that moment. And it was ugly.

"I'll do anything for you," he said. "I've lied, I've cheated for you. Yes, I've *murdered* for you! And now. . . ."

His words went on. But they were lost in the sudden explosion of joy in me.

He had confessed! Peggy was

free. Sick in mind and afraid—but free.

I put my arm around Peggy.

"Don't argue with him," I said. "You don't have to argue. Look at him, Peggy. He's beaten."

Those were my words but my stomach was throbbing because I knew that from that moment on my life was in danger. All possible friendship between us was kicked away for good.

His face was cold and murderous.

"I've despised you for a long time," he said, "and now, I'll see to it you bother me no longer."

I tensed myself instinctively, almost expecting him to reach into his pocket and take out a gun. Or an icepick, my imagination said.

I should have known better. That was not his way. Once I'd seen Jim refuse to sweep a floor in his fraternity house room. And he would always have someone else do his dirty work. And murder was dirty work.

He just opened the door.

"Good night," he said as casually as his shaken system would allow.

Then he closed the door quietly and we heard him walking down the path, unhurried, carry-

ing through to the last his pretense that the illusion of his casualness might even deceive himself. We stood there motionless and silent until the sound of his footsteps had disappeared.

Peggy's hands were shaking.

"I never knew he was like that," she said, frightened. "I never even suspected he was like that."

"I know you didn't, Peggy."

"What are we going to do?"

In answer, I went to the phone and dialed.

"Lieutenant Jones," I said when they answered.

I felt her hand grow limp in mine.

"Yes?"

It was Jones. I told him what Jim had said.

"I'll have him picked up," Jones said, "and you'd better come by in the morning. With Miss Lister. Her alibi clears you—but there are still some formalities."

"I will," I said.

"All right. You say he just left 15th Street?"

"Yes."

"All right. Goodbye."

I hung up and looked at Peggy.

"All over, baby," I said.

How wrong can a guy get?

AT MY home, I opened the door—and there was Jim. He was sitting there in the shadows.

I started for him, then stopped as he leveled a gun at me.

"Don't come any closer, David," he said, "or I'll take the pleasure of putting a slug in your belly." Jim had had some fast, stiff drinks on the way over. He wasn't used to liquor, and what he had downed was showing. That smile, the slightly, almost imperceptibly disheveled appearance. The tie knot slightly off center, the hair slightly uncombed, the hat at the minutest wrong angle. All added up. I remembered how Jim had been at college the few times he'd been drunk. He'd been quite unpredictable. And this time he had a gun in his hand. And hate for me.

I moved for my chair.

"I should shoot you," he said, "now, while the opportunity is here."

A car motor. Headlights coming to the curb. I saw them, out of the corner of my eye. My heart thudding. Was it Jones? And, if it was, would he come thudding up on the porch?

It was fortunate that Jim was drunk. Otherwise he surely would have heard the car door slamming, the footsteps on the porch, the shadowy figure that quietly stopped outside of the screen window.

"Now that you're going to kill me," I said, "you can tell me about your murdering Albert and Dennis."

He looked at me with that thin, supercilious smile on his lips. The light reflected off his polished, rimless glasses.

"You killed them, didn't you?" I said, hoping that there was no sign of eagerness in my voice.

His face sobered. "Of course I did. They both stood in my way."

"Albert?" I said.

"He attacked her," he said.

"And Dennis?"

It seemed too good to be true. A confession in the hearing of a police lieutenant.

"Why go on?" he said. He raised his gun.

"And now a third victim?" I said.

Jim didn't point the gun at me. He just let it hang loosely in his hand.

"Who knows?" he said.

"You can put down that gun

now," Jones said from the window.

Vaughan twitched a little. But he didn't turn. He seemed to listen a moment as if waiting for Jones to say something else. Then that smile came to his lips again. He seemed too drunk, too emotionally exhausted to feel fright.

"Trapped," he said.

Then Jones took Jim Vaughan away. . . .

I rushed over to Peggy and told her and we decided to drive down to Tijuana the next day.

We packed her clothes and then I went back to my room and packed some things for myself.

I slept that night. I turned out the light without dread. The end of it, I figured, closing my eyes.

No. . . .

Because the next day after I'd gone to a doctor, after I'd picked up a wedding ring, after I'd bought a bottle of champagne to open that night, I found a note slipped under my door.

I opened it.

At first I couldn't believe it. It seemed too cruel a joke.

The letterhead was *Santa Monica Police* and the message said that . . .

I drove as fast as I could up Wilshire. I wheeled around the

corner of 15th and jerked to a stop in front of Peggy's house.

I ran in the open door.

She whirled in fright as I entered. Her fingers clenched on the dress she was holding.

"Davie! What is it?"

"Are you finished packing?" I asked quickly. "We have to get out of here right away."

"Why?"

I handed her the note. She looked at it. Then looked up at me, her eyes frightened.

"*Jim?*" she said.

The note said that Jones hadn't shown up yet at Headquarters.

My car raced down Lincoln. Every time I hit a red light I thought it was a plot. My eyes stayed fastened to the road ahead. I wasn't going to the police. I didn't want to stay in town. I wanted to get out fast.

I remember looking out the rear-view mirror.

But I didn't notice anything. Because, without thinking, I was only looking for a black Cadillac.

TIJUANA. A five-hour drive. Dirty and almost wordless, with me looking at the rear view mirror. With Peggy sitting close by me and glancing at me in fear every once in a while.

We stood side by side in the little place and I slipped the ring on Peggy's finger. It felt wrong though. As if I were being forced into it. As if we really weren't sure but had to go through with it. Inevitable. There was nothing casual, nothing leisurely or pleasant. The nerve-wracking aspect of a man following to kill me. And if I felt uneasiness at the haste of the wedding, Peggy felt it twice as much.

"What is it?" I asked.

For the last ten miles she'd been staring ahead glumly at the highway. She shook her head.

"What is it?" I asked again.

She tried to smile and press my hand reassuringly.

"Nothing," she said.

"Tell me."

She shrugged.

"Oh—"

"I guess I know," I said. "The wedding. The way we're rushing. It isn't what we'd hoped for. It doesn't seem like a wedding at all."

"I—" she started. "I guess it's because it reminds me of my first wedding. The same rushing and—I was even more scared then."

"Scared?"

"Of him. Of—my—of George."

"What are you afraid of now?"

"Not of you," she said, but it

didn't sound convincing. "Jim, I guess."

That didn't sound convincing either. I tried to get her mind on something else. I thought I knew what she was afraid of.

"As soon as we hear one way or the other about Jim," I said, "we'll have a real church wedding. We'll go back to New York and have all my family at it."

She turned, a smile flickering on her tired face. We'd been driving all morning and afternoon.

"Honest?" she asked.

"Honest."

She leaned against me wearily and was at peace for a moment. She held my arm.

Night was falling over the highway and I was sleepy and tired. And starving too. We hadn't eaten much all day and my stomach was about empty.

I signed the motel registry with as pleasant a smile at Peggy as I could manage.

Mr. and Mrs. David Newton, Los Angeles.

We walked along the gravel path under the sky that was hidden by dust clouds. And we tried to pretend we were happy.

But every sound made us start nervously.

Cabin K. All wrong. A slanty

little structure, painted green and white and the paint was probably an inch thick. The shutters hung lopsided and the window curtains hung drearily.

I stood before the door and looked at her. She shook her head once and I didn't go near her. It would have been a tragic mockery to carry her over that dismal threshold. I just opened the door and stepped aside.

She stood inside looking around the room as I put the bags on the bed. The room was terrible. No touch of sweet romance. No fireplace, nor balcony overlooking a lake, nor latticed windows with boughs stirring outside. A dusty floor, a touch of stale whiskey in the air.

I looked at her. And the expression on her face made me forget my own irritation and worries. I took her hand.

"Peg," I said, "I'm sorry. I wish it was a castle. But it's all we can get now. We *have* to sleep."

"I know," she said. Without enthusiasm.

While she was in the bathroom I went down to the manager's office.

"Hey, can I get some food?" I asked.

"Afraid not," he said. "All I

got's candy. And that popcorn machine over there."

"How about some ice?"

"Only got a little, mister," he said. "Ice's hard to get around here."

"Look," I said, "we've just been married. And I have a bottle of champagne in my bag. Can't you let us have a little ice? Maybe a pailful or something?"

He looked at me studiously. Then he got compassion. He got a pail and put a chunk of ice in it.

"Fifty cents," he said.

I paid him and held back the temper.

"What about glasses?" I said irritably.

"Glasses in the cabin."

"I can't get this chunk of ice in the glasses," I said.

He reached under the counter. . . .

"*Voilà!*" I cried to her as she came out of the bathroom. I'd chopped the ice into small pieces and decided to chill the bottle instead of putting the ice chips in the glasses. I'd stuck the bottle into the pail. But the ice only covered about two inches on the bottom of the pail. The champagne would never chill.

"Oh!" Peggy said. "Champagne!"

She tried to smile and keep smiling.

She sat on the bed as I opened the bottle. I noticed her glance at the pail, at the object beside it. Then she turned her eyes away and smiled at me again.

She was wearing a long dressing robe. She sat on the bed and watched me. But she wasn't relaxed. Her poise was strained, her lips forced into a smile.

I put down the unopened bottle and sat beside her and put my arms around her.

"Honey, be happy," I said. "It's not paradise, I know. But we're away at last. And we're free of the past."

Her arms clung to me.

"Oh, Davie," she said, "don't let anything happen to me. Don't let anything spoil it."

"I won't," I said, cheerfully.

Then I stood up and opened the bottle.

"Oops!"

The white foaming champagne spurted out of the bottle mouth and ran onto the floor. I leveled the bottle quickly and poured it into the glasses. Then I put down the bottle next to the pail. I put some pieces of ice into the glasses.

"I shouldn't dilute it," I said, "but if I don't, the champagne will be too warm."

"It's all right," she said.

I handed her a glass. I held my own out to her.

"My love," I toasted.

SHE smiled. We sat side by side and drank. I was thirsty. The cool tingling of the champagne tasted good. I polished off the glass in two swallows.

"Popcorn, m'lady?" I asked.

She took a few pieces. I tried some. It was stale.

"I wish we could get a steak dinner," I said, "but there's nothing around here. I promise as soon as we get back to Santa Monica or—wherever we're going," I added as her face grew concerned, "I'll buy you a nice, juicy sirloin."

"You'll make my mouth water," she said.

I felt a little lightheaded. I blinked at her and grinned.

"Mrs. Newton," I said.

She smiled dutifully and I poured two more glasses. One and a half really. Peggy had only drunk about half a glass.

I felt the warmth coursing my body and I had a little more popcorn. It made me thirsty. I put the bag aside because it spoiled the taste of the champagne.

The stuff worked fast. I felt as

if I were floating. I put my head down on her lap. I reached out casually and stroked her.

She tried to smile but she couldn't.

"Baby," I said.

I kissed her on the mouth. I felt something rising in me. A familiar sensation. Everything had been building it up through the months. And now hunger and lightheadedness were added to it. A cabin isolated. And my brain saying speciously—she's your wife now.

I poured some more to drink.

"Peggy?"

"No, thanks," she said. "Maybe we should—find someplace to eat."

"There isn't any place around here," I said.

"Maybe up the road," she said.

"Honey, not now. I'm tired. I don't want to drive again."

Her chest rose and fell with a shudder.

"Do you think Jim is—?"

I had my mouth over hers to stop her talking about it.

"Now, never mind him," I said.

"This is our wedding night."

"Davie."

I started to unbutton her robe. Her hands held mine. "No, Davie." Gently pleading.

"Peggy, stop it," I said. "What

are you afraid of? Have I ever hurt you?"

"I'm sorry. I just—"

I opened another button. She was staring at me, her face white and tense. She looked like some maiden about to be sacrificed to a horrible god.

"Peggy!" I said angrily.

She had her dress on under the robe.

"Davie, please don't be angry. Don't you see I'm—"

"See! See *what*?"

"Davie—"

"What do you think marriage is, a *business* relationship?"

"Davie."

I didn't look at her. I had another drink. She drank another glass. We sat there in silence and we both drank. She seemed to be trying to get drunk. Relentlessly trying to lose herself so she could please me. But it seemed she couldn't do it, as if this fear in her were imbedded in her very flesh.

I don't remember every moment. But I do remember that she took off her robe after I acted sullen. She took her dress off and sat beside me in her slip. Her motions were nervous and shaky. She kept drinking. Her lips shook.

She tried to smile. "You won't—"

I didn't answer. My breath was heavier. I could see the lines of her body through the silk now. A beautiful body. My lips pressed against the warm flesh of her shoulder. I thought of all the times I'd wanted her. I thought of Audrey screaming into my chest. I wanted to scream too. Hunger seemed to have been converted into an ugly drive in me. My mind kept trying to stop me, but I kept kicking it aside.

I caressed her. She shuddered.

"Davie." A frightened little voice.

"Stop that," I said.

I heard her throat move. I kissed her throat. She drew away. I pulled her close in what I thought was a gentle way.

She drew away again and stood up.

"I think I'll take a bath," she said.

It sounded so obvious to me. It irritated me. I stood up quickly and slid my arms around her.

"No," I said.

Her eyes like a frightened bird's. Trapped, helpless.

"Peggy, I'm your husband." Thick voice, uncomprehending voice.

"I know, I know but—"

I was lost in a fog. She kept backing away. I followed. I was

out of my mind. I grabbed her. She swiftly squirmed out of my embrace.

"No," she said. More firmly now. A little fire in her eyes.

I grabbed her.

She tore away from me. "You're not going to touch me!"

"No?"

I moved toward her and she backed away. I thought about her husband. I threw the thought aside. Almost. Her fright drove me on harder. I could almost understand her husband.

She backed into the bedside table.

"Davie—no!"

I clutched her shoulders.

Suddenly her eyes expanded, her lips drew back as she sucked in a terrified breath. I could almost hear the scream tearing up through her throat.

That was when something managed to lance its way through the thick coating of mindless desire in me. I saw myself. I saw her. And I was doing to her what they'd all done. I was no better than any of them. And the shame of it made me turn away with tears in my eyes and a shaking hand over my eyes.

"I'm—I'm—sorry," I muttered brokenly.

A sudden rushing sound. A biting pain in my right shoulder. I jumped around with a sharp gasp.

She was holding the icepick in her hand and staring at me, her eyes like white dotted marbles in her head, her lips pressed together into a hideous white gash.

MY MOUTH fell open. I stared at her dumbly.

I don't know how long we stood there without a sound. She was like a tensed animal, the icepick raised in her hand, her dark pupils boring insanely into my eyes.

I moved back a step then. The words seemed to come from my mouth by themselves.

"You're *crazy*," I said.

She still looked at me, something tight holding her together.

Then she noticed the big drops of blood running over my hand and dripping on the floor. She leaned forward a little, the berserk look fading from her face. The features relaxed. Her arm dropped.

"Davie?" she said.

"Get away from me."

"Davie, I didn't stab you."

I backed away some more.

"Davie, it wasn't you."

"Get *away*."

"I didn't stab at *you*. Davie, not at *you*!"

"I said get away!"

I backed off in horror. And then the idea came and the breath was sucked out of me.

"You killed Albert, didn't you?" I said.

She stopped. She looked at me blankly.

"You *killed* him, didn't you?" I said hoarsely.

"Davie, I—"

"You did, didn't you?"

"What difference does it make?"

"Oh my God!" I cried. "You kill a man and you ask what difference it makes!"

"You said you could forget everything," she said as if that wiped the slate clean.

"Forget that you murdered a man!"

"He wasn't a man, he was an animal!"

"He was a man, a *man*! And you killed him!"

Her throat moved. She started to tremble. She raised her hand. She saw the icepick and then threw it away with revulsion, and it rolled over the floor.

"I didn't," she said weakly.

"You did!"

"Yes, I—I killed—h-h-him. But—"

I felt myself drained in an instant, as if some invisible vampire had bitten me. I staggered back, hardly feeling the stabbing pain in my shoulder at all.

"You lied to me," I said dizzily. "All this time you lied to me."

"No, Davie, no," she said miserably.

She was trying to wipe away the past. It was what she always meant. That we should forget everything, even that she had killed.

"You said what happened before didn't matter. You said it didn't," she said.

"What are you?" I said. "An animal yourself? You kill a man and then you say forget it."

"I was out of my mind. I couldn't help it. I—didn't mean to."

"Why did you lie? Why did you lie to me?"

"Davie, don't." Tears were flooding down her cheeks. "I was upset. I couldn't lose you. You're all I have now. Don't desert me. I need you. I *need* you."

"And you let me think that Jim killed them," I said.

"He killed Dennis," she said,

"I didn't do that. What's the difference if Jim dies for one crime or two? Didn't he *say* he killed Albert?"

He'd lied for her. I knew it suddenly. I hadn't gotten any confession from him. He'd heard Jones out there and he'd lied once more to save Peggy.

I just couldn't understand it. All I could think was one thing.

"And we're married," I said. "We're *married*."

Something hard gripped her features.

"Oh, that's awful, isn't it?" she said, her voice breaking. "That's just horrible, isn't it?"

"I don't think you feel guilty at all," I said, "I think you feel *justified* for everything you did. You think you had a *right* to kill Albert, don't you?"

"I *did* have a right! He was a pig! He tore at my clothes. I *had* to kill him! I had to, can't you see that!"

"No, I can't! I can't see it!"

Something seemed to start in her. Way down. Like a flood of hot lava surging up to the mouth of a volcano. It shook her body as it came up. It made her arms tremble at her sides, made the fingers of both clamp into bony fists.

It exploded in my face.

"You're like *all* of them!" she yelled. "Like every damn one of them! *Defending* each other! *Plotting* with each other against us! Driving us into a pit! A *pit*! Hurting us, *brutalizing* us, *destroying* us. Twisting our hopes into knots! And tearing our hearts out! You don't care, oh, *you* don't care! You're all the same, *all* of you! You don't care about us! You don't care if we have minds, you don't care if we're sensitive, you don't care if we're afraid. You just rip the beauty out of our lives and give us ugliness instead! And then you tell everybody what wonderful men you are, how *happy* you've made us! All of you—*pigs*! Get away from me you filthy pig, *you pig, YOU PIG!*"

Her blood-drained fists were crushed against her white cheeks and saliva ran from her twitching mouth. I stood there, paralyzed, looking in blank horror at a girl I'd never seen.

I didn't even hear the door open. The first thing I knew was Peggy turning. And then I looked toward the door.

Jim.

HE CAME across the room quickly. I couldn't move. I

watched him take off his top coat and put it over her shoulders. She tried to throw it off but, without a moment's hesitation, he slapped her across the face. Hard. The red flared up on her cheek and she gasped and slowly backed away from him.

"You're coming with me," he said, "don't argue with me. You'd better, if you don't want to be turned in. You don't want to be jailed and executed for murder, do you?"

Her eyes on him were wide and staring. Glassy eyes like an insane cat.

"I'm all you have now," he said. "Your dear *David* wouldn't lift his little finger to save you now!"

His words seemed to whip her into submission. The wildness was gone. The deepest Peggy came into control. The weak Peggy, the Peggy who always needed guidance and discipline. Who could never think for herself. She looked at him like a frightened child would look at its parent.

"Jim, you—" she started, "you won't—let them do—"

"Come on, Peggy," he said. "How long do you think I can protect you from the world?"

She didn't answer. She just stood by him and let him lead her to the door. I stood there bleeding and not feeling it. Staring after them helplessly. Detached from reality.

"You won't let them, will you Jim?" she begged.

He looked at her pathetic face. He heard the lost fright in her voice. And, for the first time in his life, he showed in my sight that there was more than machinery in him.

He drew her against him and pressed his lips gently to her hair.

"Peggy," he said, "oh, *Peggy*."

Only an instant. Then he raised his head and his face was hard.

"They won't get you," he said. "Not while I live."

I might have been invisible standing there. The blood dripping from my finger tips onto the floor. Me watching a world slip away from me. A rootless, detached feeling. As if something I'd called my heart had been torn away leaving me hollow, a shell.

I noticed that there was somebody outside the door. A heavy knock sounded.

"Is there anything wrong in

here?" the voice asked. "I heard shouting."

Jim Vaughan spoke calmly, distinctly.

"This is my wife," he said. "I'm taking her away from that man in there."

Muttering. "I knew it, I *knew* it."

Then, at the door, Jim turned. He had his arm protectingly around Peggy's shoulders. And for some reason, all the smugness and the meanness and the cynical detachment seemed to have gone from him.

He looked at me. And it seemed as if he felt as helpless as I did. He had tried to save her again and again. Doing everything he could, even to confessing for her crime. Now, if they were fugitives, it would be Jim they sought for murder. He had thoroughly and completely wrecked his life.

And, despite all that, she had not changed.

And I knew later—not then because I could do nothing but stand there mutely—that Jim loved her. In a way that I and my sort of person cannot understand, much less appreciate. In the old way. The unquestioning way. Defying the traditions of so-

ciety rather than losing it. Loving in a way that even allowed a man to kill for his love. Right out of the middle ages. Yet, something strangely and perversely noble there.

At least there seemed a sort of quiet unassuming nobility to Jim as he stood there by the silent Peggy. The frightened and weak Peggy who would never in her life be able to face the world without help even if she feared that help above all else. My Peggy Ann Lister.

Jim turned to her then. His eyes were on her only and his whole mind and whole heart held her alone.

"Come away, my dear," he said.

And led her out of my life forever.

The police came soon. I hadn't left. They picked me up on a morals charge. Later they called Santa Monica and fortunately Jones was still alive. He gave them the facts and they released me and started after Peggy and Jim. But they didn't catch up with them.

And one day I saw Jones and he told me they'd caught the man who'd attacked Peggy at *Funland*.

"I don't understand," I said, "Albert—"

"Grady didn't do it," Jones said.

"But—the scratches," I said, in a last confusion about my Peggy Ann, "she said she'd scratched the man who'd tried to attack her. And Albert's face was covered with scratches."

"That's right," he said, "they both were scratched. She did both jobs."

I looked at him a moment and then I lowered my head. And I whispered, "God help her."

That's about all. I finished my

novel and sold it and made \$1700 on it. I talked Audrey into going back to her family in Pennsylvania. I met some people and laughed again and pretended that everything was status quo again.

I read the papers.

Maybe you read the story, too. It was about a month ago. When they found Jim and Peggy in a Kansas City hotel room. And when they took away the thing that Peggy was fondling in her hands she said they mustn't.

She said they had to let her keep his head because she loved the man.



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